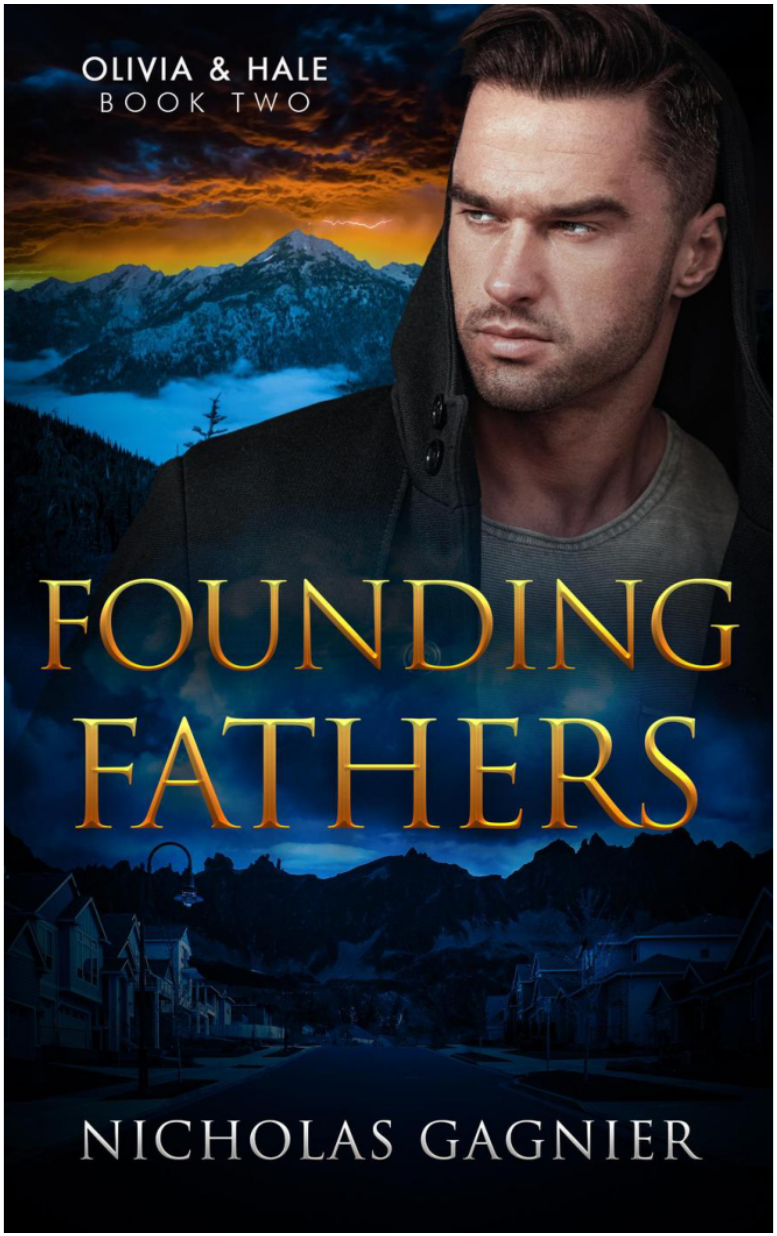
OLIVIA & HALE
BOOK TWO
FOUNDING FATHERS
NICHOLAS GAGNIER

OLIVIA & HALE
BOOK TWO

FOUNDING FATHERS

NICHOLAS GAGNIER

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TECHNIKRON (Standalone)
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for my mother

Retrospective: A Journey Through the Afterlife

WRITING A BOOK—LET alone several—is an arduous task.

It stands to reason, then, that writing an entire saga complete with shifting realities, evolving threats, transient subgenres, and a revolving door of starring characters is a feat that borders on impossible from the outset.

I guess it wouldn't hurt to admit that I didn't set out to do all of that with my early books. The entire Shroud Saga—consisting of the *Olivia & Hale* series' four books and its quadrilogical spinoff, *The Book of Death*—was always written one story at a time. From the subtle magical realism and topical seriousness of *Mercy Road*'s introduction of Harper Whitaker to the twin conflicts in the fictional town of Haven, Washington beginning to blur the lines between political thriller and full-on fantasy in *Founding Fathers* and *Dead's Haven*, respectively; then plunging six characters from the aforementioned novels into a fantastical odyssey through a purgatorial world in *Olivia & Hale*'s final volume, there was never a methodical master plan to tie these divergent characters, settings, or stories together until it was already happening. I didn't foresee any ability in the beginning to actually pull it off.

By the time I came up with the idea of continuing Harper and Tim's stories in the spinoff, beginning with *Leviathan*, I would like to think the feeling that their saga was unfinished meant the second series was destined to benefit from better planning. That would be a blatant lie, because I was doing what I had always done in trusting these characters to lead the story where it needed to go.

Unlike the great and epic stories many of us grew up with, The Shroud Saga didn't benefit from following one consistent set of characters. Harper is the perfect example of this trend, as she is absent from almost as many books as she is present as the main narrator, only appearing in five of the eight novels. This was a stylistic choice, but also a practical one made to allow other characters to shine and prevent the former from wearing out her welcome over the course of such a long story. That decision did not occur in a total vacuum but wasn't planned more than one or two

books in advance at any given time.

Undoubtedly, this kind of storytelling goes against every conventional piece of advice I was taught about carrying a story. I've had readers express disappointment in the past that a character they became invested in over the course of a single book be discouraged from continuing. Others who continued on to meet new members of the ensemble would message me personally to express glee at reuniting with those characters at different junctions of the saga. One example would be an early reader, expressing a deep bond with Sam Wallace, the suburban ex-housewife turned into a trained killer as she popped in and out of the narrative over her three appearances. Many readers who began with *Leviathan* back when I was marketing *The Book of Death* as a separate story and become attached to Tim and Ramona's quasi-romantic bond, wouldn't meet Harper at the same point as those who began with her teenage version in *Mercy Road*, while those who re-encountered her as an immortal possessed greater points of reference into Harper's overall character.

Ultimately, every book in The Shroud Saga is its own self-contained story while also forming one puzzle piece in an overarching tale about the journey of two mortals burdened with cosmic responsibilities and the legion of fellow humanity, they must leave behind to save it from Creation's worst machinations.

I hope that wherever in this universe you begin will compel you to return to it.

NICHOLAS GAGNIER
November 2024

OLIVIA & HALE
BOOK TWO

FOUNDING FATHERS

NICHOLAS GAGNIER

Part 1

Mothers

Samantha

Weddings are a bleak affair.

It occurs to me at the worst moment, too, in a sea of somber dresses and black cravats.

Statistically, marriage is far more likely to end in divorce than dying in each other's arms, but who are we kidding? Children were made to console dying parents.

No one better echoes that sentiment than my sister Stephanie, her tiny frame tucked into a plush red chair that matches the carpet but not the white drapes or the small oak coffin across the room.

She refuses to look at it. She sits across from me, chomping peppermint gum to cover up the half bottle of gin she pounded back on the limo ride here, glaring at our sister Laura, who somehow turned this into the social event of the year.

Local celebrities. Activists. I'm pretty sure I saw the mayor at some point, lurking in the corner.

Laura uses warm green eyes and forced laughter to charm their minds, and a dress better suited for cocktail parties to woo men's eyes. Their wives snort at her when she twirls her hair, and scowl when she flirts with the husbands.

Not one of these people knew my mother. Her face, adorned on an old photo Laura had blown up as a stand-in for the open casket, shows her smiling. It was the only good picture we could find on two days' notice. Only found it because Stephanie fell asleep, her head in the family photo album.

If our mother were here, she would kick half these people to the curb. Tom and Corey—one my senior and the other five years junior—stand off to the side of the room, talking quietly. Tom is a young Dean Martin in his pressed suit, while Corey, with a shaved head and hastily assembled attire, could have slept in his.

We all know Laura has hijacked this event. Her husband Paul does his best to restrain himself from pulling his wife off her promiscuous tour of the funeral-going elite. Eventually, he gives up on my sister's dignity and wanders away to save his own.

"Are you okay?" I ask, as we watch him cross the room, "Seem

kind of pissed."

"Please," Stephanie says. "You want to ask that question even less than I want to answer it."

"You're right, because it seems you're only at peace sucking on the end of a bottle in a paper bag at this point. You can't do this all alone."

"You forget, Sam. I've been doing this all alone. Who sat with Mom during all the treatments? Who sat with lawyers and banks, went through trusts and funeral plans and estates and more bullshit than the four of you have ever gone through for her? Who had to listen to the insults and misery and fucking slurs? When was the last time Mom called you a whore in her sleep, when you were sitting right there next to her?"

"Sorry," I say. She sighs. Has not looked me in the eyes. Probably to keep the tears out of her own. "It wasn't fair you got stuck with that."

"It's fine, Sam. Should have known it would happen."

"Least you didn't have to deal with *him*," I say. It's a small comfort, but the best I can offer her. "God knows how that would have gone."

She chuckles. "I would have ripped him a new one, likely. Last time we spoke, he was congratulating me on my first divorce. Motherfucker."

"That's appropriate."

"When was the last time *you* spoke to him?"

"Hmmm?"

"Dad. When did you speak to him last?"

I want to tell the truth, but don't dare.

"About a year ago. Derek had just left me for that...*person* from Bermuda. Wrote me a check and disappeared in the night. Dad called, asking how I was. Thought he was selling something."

"You always were dumb, sis," Stephanie says.

"I don't know. He was asking more questions about Laura than Derek. Not the slightest interest in my life. Probably because I have no money to lend him.

"Nathan was still largely in the dark. I didn't have time for Dad's shit. Hung up on him and cried into a bottle of red. Complete meltdown that night."

Until he called me a year later, I want to finish. The night my mother died.

“What the flying fuck is wrong with men? Can they not just keep that thing in their pants?” She holds her bent pinky finger up to personify the appendage.

“I don’t have one, or I’d tell you, Steph.”

Across the room, Laura calls everyone to their attention, clinking her stemmed glass of water with a plastic fork. She always was inefficient.

“Time for the eulogy, I guess,” I mutter. “You ready?”

Stephanie chuckles, the first time today I’ve not caught her sulking.

“To put this bag of bones in the ground? You bet.”

THE PULPIT FEELS SMOOTH under my shaking hands. I have rehearsed my part a couple thousand times, but I forget all of it now. After listening to my brothers, trying to conjure any happy memories they can salvage into coherent tributes; then Laura, making light of it all, I don’t want to speak until the nausea subsides. Stephanie’s eulogy is bitter, and I know I can’t let my mother be laid to rest on such a note.

“My mother didn’t want a funeral,” I admit to the crowd. Looking into a sea of beady eyes and fake sympathies, uncomfortable postures and tapping feet, the words are Moby Dick. Every last one fights back.

“She would not have even wanted this wake. She couldn’t stand me, her middle born. Told me I would end up on some corner, peddling heroin or pussy. No joke.

“She didn’t love Laura, who she treated like a doll. Avoided Corey because she hated the smell of pot. And Steph, who just wanted to be loved, unlike the rest of us; well, Catherine hated her too.

“The only one she probably did show affection to, at some point, was my brother Tom, who is also the only of us that turned out normal.”

Laura sneers in the front row, clasping onto Paul’s hand for support during the wave of uncomfortable chuckling.

“She would have definitely told you all to shove off if she saw you here, because that’s who my mother was. A woman hurt too many times, stripped of her emotions like rocks in a coal mine.

“The last time I spoke to Catherine, she asked me if I was gonna

get sewn up because my husband left me. I retorted something equally pleasant, I'm sure. Something to do with smuggling liquor into her semi-private room.

"But that was my mother. She knew life would never get any better and avoided trying to improve on what she had. And here I am, flailing like a bird with broken wings in the wind just trying to wrap my head around...life."

My name is Sam, and I'm not an alcoholic. Just a basket case with bottles of merlot hidden all around my house.

"She gave me many gifts, but happiness was never one of them. I guess, then, the best I can is...rest in peace, Mom."

LIFE IS A BLEAK AFFAIR.

One minute, you have it all. A house where the bills get paid, the lights stay on, the husband stays faithful. One minute, the future is locked down, the retirement savings are being built, and the kids are alright.

Easy how it can all be undone in a five-minute conversation.

My messages are full, the cat is hungry, and shoes obscure the landing of my condo. Two floors up, the familiar roar of video games heaves along, making my ears pop.

Yelling at my son to preserve *his* hearing until after college, I hit play on an archaic box that filters my phone calls. The cat, an overweight tabby named Yukalaylee, incessantly begs me to fill his silver dish beside it.

Norman, my lawyer from Pittsburgh, rattles off details about a fight he had with an estate firm. Catherine had nothing to her name after ten years of disability, so I pay him no heed.

"Yuke, relax!" I tell the tabby. ""Nathan, I *told* you to feed him."

He squawks defiantly and rubs against my leg.

Next message. My mechanic, telling me the shitbox is up for an oil change. Another person looking for a payday.

Sorry honey, it will have to wait another month. Then, as if he hears my thoughts, a warning about not coming to see him. *Don't start another car fire, Sam.*

Next message. Stephanie.

Next message.

"Hi, Sam."

Patchy. Like a broom sweeping gravel. My father, who called me

last Wednesday, the night Catherine died.

"Um, it's me. Your Dad. Been trying to call you, but I keep getting through to the sound of a screaming cat or something."

Dammit, Nathan.

"Anyway, I just wanted to say I'm sorry about your mother. She was...well, she was a strong-willed person, and she gave me strong-willed children. I know I'm very late with this call; God knows. If you ever want to grab a coffee and we can exchange memories.... or something!"

God, I think, *he's so awkward.*

"Anyway, I went to the doctor last week, and he said something came up on the blood test, so I'm penciled in for an MRI next month. I was just wondering if you could come with me, you know, because I'm a little short on cash-"

There it is.

I press stop on the machine. There are three more messages. Three more people lining up because I am the bank of Sam.

"Yuke!" I hiss at the incessant feline. He hounds my heels as I open the overhead cupboard and pull down a crumpled blue bag. He knows.

Downstairs, the doorbell rings. I drop star-shaped kibble into Yuke's bowl and watch him collapse into the beginnings of a food coma. Satisfied he will remain preoccupied; I descend dual landings of my condo to answer the chiming.

A young girl wearing a cream scarf around her head occupies my front lawn, hugging a covered glass bowl.

"Hello?" I say to her. "Can I help you?"

The girl smiles, but her hazel eyes are a dead stare. "Hello, missus. We just moved in next door."

I had seen the long van earlier in the week. I may have yelled at the young movers who, in a past life, would have appealed to me, even blocking my driveway as I was trying to get to a dentist's appointment.

"Oh, hi sweetie. Nice to see you again. I'm Sam. What's your name? I didn't catch it the other day."

"I am Nadia. There's Iza, my mother; my uncle Farhad and father Omar, but Father does not move or speak."

"So, your father is in the wheelchair?"

"Yes," the girl replies, "but you should never speak to him or my mother. If you need to speak to one of them, speak with Farhad or

I, please."

"Well, welcome to the neighborhood, Nadia. And thank you so much for the food!"

"Oh no," Nadia blushes. "These are not for you. This is dinner for my family. I am sorry if I misrepresented."

"Oh no," I echo her. "How presumptuous of me. I am sorry. Please tell your family we are very happy to have you here. Enjoy your stay!"

I shut the door.

I am such an embarrassment. Yukalaylee stares from his perch on the stairs, clearly in agreement.

Peter

It only takes a single moment, one of millions in the fabric of time, to realize you don't give two fucks about your fellow human beings.

Yes, it could be one o'clock at your local supermarket on a Saturday afternoon. You want to reach over the sagging woman smacking her husband with an ebony cane to grab that last flat of pork, circumnavigate the guy who helps you understand why airlines make people like him have to buy two seats, just to grab a loaf of bread and escape this bloodcurdling showcase of spoiled children and even more entitled adults.

For the young lady on the register, it's a life sentence until five p.m. She begrudgingly passes the same items over the scanner, sometimes hundreds of times a day. Her pout is unsympathetic to judging eyes that claim a stake in dead chickens and wilting heads of lettuce. Some try to make small talk with her. Topics range anywhere from weather to sexual harassment.

This is one of many places I come out of ritual, if only as a reminder that the President could start firing nukes around the globe tomorrow, and my only disappointment would be missing swaths of these creatures wiped out before my eyes.

I wonder if the girl on the register would agree. As long as her nails did not break, it would probably be welcome to her, too.

I have rarely been in love, but a lot of people around me suck at it.

My parents sucked at it.

My sister is bad at it.

My brother's love life is nonexistent.

My tenth grade math English teacher went through a very public divorce. Everyone in school was talking about it for weeks.

People talk about love like it's make-or-break; like it's material success. You want the fairy tale romance, but in reality, have a person within arm's reach you can beat down until they are a shell of themselves, trying to fit them into your perfect fucking box.

My great-grandparents didn't have to choose love. It was chosen

for them. He was a farmer's son. She was a cattle rancher's daughter. Love was transactional, a promise of marriage for some new mares or cattle. They spent decades together before they heard about divorce, but by then, were almost dead anyway.

My father was the business type. My mother was... well, his third wife. He was never home, but had a new secretary pick him up for each trip. One of those secretaries, a blonde named Mary, had loose lips. Mom found out at a Christmas party. After that, we only saw Dad's name on child support cheques. Those bought her new liquor cabinets, and a boyfriend named Doug. When the money dried up, Doug wasn't Dad, and both were gone.

The only people I know who don't suck at love are Viktor and Sydney, mostly because they don't give a shit about love.

She works at a corner store during the day, selling underage kids cigarettes after midnight.

He deals pot from his living room, talking trash on the Internet about hard working American citizens and watching subscription cable. Vic sleeps with a gun in his nightstand, but he tells me it's for Syd, in case she ever comes at him with a knife.

It only takes a single moment to realize that all the potential your parents promised you culminated in you hanging around a convenience store with a mouthy clerk, waiting to sell drugs.

Sydney is on the bottom of totem poles for merchants of death. Cigarettes and alcohol in an official capacity, weed and occasional heroin under the table. Over the counter drugs are in the third aisle. She will tell you cigarettes are terrible while selling them to you, and hand out smokes to underage kids on her five-minute break. She accepts bribes as identification from school kids and relabeled the penny donation tray "take a fuck you, leave a fuck you".

"If you're not gonna buy anything, wait outside, jackass."

"C'mon, Syd," I say, "it's hot as balls outside. Plus, there's a bunch of weirdos out there."

"Where weirdos belong," she says. "Buy something or skedaddle, Pete. Cops come in for coffee, you're loitering and that makes you, my business. Don't need questions I can't answer."

"Just show them your tits."

Syd sneers. She's small, like a child, and I'm sure she has never worn adult clothes.

"Funny," she replies, "So funny, I should string you up and beat you to death with your comedy career. Take a fucking hike, Pete.

Do my boyfriend's business outside."

Knowing better than to argue, I put down the magazine I've been flipping through and walk past her.

If I knew this is what life would turn out to be, I would have asked my mother to abort me.

OUTSIDE IS A SAUNA, and I can feel the air-conditioned comfort of the corner store escaping my body as I vacate it. To my right, a couple fellows named Jason and Rob peddle pot to innocent bystanders.

"'Ay dude, want to buy some weed?" the lanky adolescent in a wifebeater asks with a dramatic nod, as if he wants everyone to know he's on the down low. His arms are thin, the rest of him thinner. His partner is shorter, wider and of fewer words.

"C'mon guys," I say. "You're small-time. Don't try and offload your dirt weed on me."

The loud one, Jason, scoffs. "'Ay bro, you know, I resent that sort of shit, 'less you're willing to smoke me a fat blunt and show me what big-time feels like. Nah, I guess you're just gonna walk away, and leave us mortals here to tend our second-rate *ganja*, ain't that shit right?"

Saying nothing, I pull a smoke from my jacket and light it.

"You know," Jason says. "Hear there's some hush hush going on with your boy Vic."

"Wouldn't know," I reply. "Haven't heard anything."

"Whoa, hold up. You mean to say we see you coming down here every day, pushing *mota* for this guy, and he don't tell you nothing?"

"When I need to know, I'm sure he'll tell me."

I exhale those words like cigarette smoke, heavy and labored.

I didn't even want to leave my house today.

"Word around the neighborhood is he's holding nightly meetings at the warehouse on Lord Street. All white guys: some skinheads, business types, biker dudes. Now I'm the same shade as their shitkickers, so I see a bunch of cracker-white brothers all heading into a dark building together, I'm thinking' they ain't having brunch or some shit, you know?"

So that's where Vic has been disappearing to, lately.

"Maybe they're playing poker."

"Could be. Could be. But *then* I get wind that Rupert Smith's at some of them meetings—yeah, that racist motherfucker. And get this. Cat's running for governor! All that that dough he got lying about from his telecom days."

"And you don't think it's a coincidence?"

"Motherfucker, who said coincidence? You got this mogul who ran multiple businesses *out* of fuckin' business when he opened shop upstate. Was big in the news for a while, whole Wall Street bullshit, but was good, meant we got that sweet broadband Internet up here. Fuck that mom-and-pop, dial-up bullshit!"

He thumps his chest.

"Anyway, this motherfucker is holding some covert shit on Lord Street—with *your* boy Viktor. After ten p.m., too."

"So?" I ask.

"Motherfucker, if I was out after ten p.m., the cops in this town would lock me up!" Robert, his stockier friend in a trench coat, nods in strong agreement.

"Look, man," Jason says, "I don't know what Vic tells you and don't, but as a visible minority in this backwards-ass place, I should tell you I ain't comfortable when I see shit like that. I know exclusion when I see it, and Rupert Smith is bad fuckin' news, homie. Should talk some sense into your boy."

I haul on the dead end of my cigarette and pitch it at the sewer grate. It bounces off the bars, rolling away in the heat like a tumbleweed.

THE GUY SHOWS UP TEN minutes later, and hands me a crumpled hundred dollar bill. I give him the drugs, and he's on his way.

Syd emerges from the store, smoke and lighter in one hand and a black coffee in the other. After locking the door, she takes a seat at the curb and beckons me over to her.

"I see those two sad sacks left," she says, gesturing to where Robert and Jason were standing. "Finally ran out of fertilizer to sell, I guess."

"Actually," I reply, "they felt like getting pizza."

Syd rolls her eyes, lighting her smoke and taking a long gulp of the coffee. A thick plume of menthol cigarette smoke wafts through my senses.

"I don't know how you can defend people like that, Pete. All

they do is push drugs and start fights."

"I'm just like them, not any better because of skin color."

Syd scoffs. "Fuck that. White people founded this country. Our taxes built this country. My daddy worked every day of his adult life, along with millions of others, to make this country great."

"I'm guessing you've been going to those meetings on Lord Street, huh?"

Her sour demeanor turns even more bitter.

"Who told you about that?"

"Little birdie."

"Was this little birdie a person of color who happens to stand outside my place of employment all day, hocking marijuana and stupid rumors?"

"Could be."

"Don't worry about it, Peter. And don't tell Vic you know. If he hasn't told you, clearly, you're not ready." She extinguishes her cigarette on the pavement between her sneakers and stands up. "When you're ready to know, you'll know."

"Know what?"

Syd ignores the question and unlocks the door.

"Don't keep Vic waiting for his money, Pete."

Samantha

Saturday mornings are a bleak affair.

My condo used to be nicer. It was a little cleaner, a little better lit. A little more alive. For all the reverence we place in photographing every blissful moment, capturing the immaterial in material frames; they don't replace husbands who run off to paradise with whores. They don't force teenage hermits, holed up in their bedrooms, to talk to you longer than the space of a dead-eyed grunt.

Pictures painting your villain of a mother in a momentary, human light are the same ones that will not bring her back.

My name is Samantha Wallace and my only friend in the world is a disgruntled feline looking for food. Yuke follows me from room to room, as I search for a single one that still affords me comfort.

These pictures are everywhere, dammit.

It was Derek who insisted on them. We were shopping at some department store, when Nathan was a wide-eyed toddler bellowing against the confines of a shopping cart. I can still smell the cologne as strong as his words. He wanted pictures everywhere, little perfect memories when he would be gone all those long hours. For when he would be inside another woman, and I would be alone.

The memory is still enough to tie knots in my stomach, until I can no longer breathe and force myself to escape into the heavy morning air.

Weyburn Lane is alive in all the ways my haunted condo is not. Prepubescent boys with cracking voices ride their bikes in circles, dishing about affairs their parents need not hear. The size of Kandace Roberts' tits. The late night pornos they've been renting on Pay Per View. The latest gorefest of a videogame their old brothers bought, but moms won't let them simulate murder with.

I'm the cool mom who buys my ten year old that video game, to make up for all the other shortcomings.

The boys notice me watching them. Doug Carter, the spiky-haired snot from three doors down, appears to be leader for the day. They slowly pedal down towards me, with Doug riding hands-

free for extra brownie points.

"Hi, Mrs. Wallace," he calls.

"Hi boys," I reply, shielding eyes from blinding light with my hand. "You know, Doug, I'm surprised your mom and dad haven't talked to you about helmet safety. Everything ok at home?"

"Yeah, why wouldn't it be?"

"Oh well, you know. I'm sure your mom would hate to see you in a coma. Brain is the most important organ, after all."

Doug chuckles. "My mom knows I'm a good biker. I haven't taken a spill since I was in elementary, unlike your son."

The boys behind him—Chester Holmes and Chris Thompson—struggle to contain their giggling.

"No, no. I get it," I reply. "Kids like picking on the weird ones. The athletically un-gifted. The kids who like to stay up in their room all day, playing video games and being vampires. Who might not do as well with girls."

"Yeah, because they're gay," Chester whispers to Chris, which makes Doug snicker.

"I will have you kids know; if my son turns out to be gay, I will be the first to take him out to a gay bar for a drink."

"You're not helping him, lady," Chris snorts.

"It's fine," Chester retorts. "He can hang out with the foreigner girl, with her daddy in a wheelchair."

"Do your parents know you all talk like this?" I ask. "Or do they talk like that, too?"

"Oh," Doug says, "My dad says that if his bosses hadn't given all the jobs to the foreigners, his brother would not have lost his job at the factory."

"Yeah, and my mom thinks all gays should be sterilized," Chester says. "Also, she says foreigners ruin everything. Leech off the system. Make it more dangerous for us."

"Last week when the foreigners moved in," Chris brags, "my dad loaded his gun, right in front of me. Said he would keep an eye on next door."

I will never understand my neighbors, or their horrendous children. Mine is a catatonic angel in comparison.

"I don't think that will be necessary, Chris. They seem like good people. You should really try giving them a chance."

"No offense, Mrs. Wallace," Doug said, "but the rumor mill isn't being kind to you at the moment. I think I'll believe Mr. Thompson

over you. He's the one with the gun."

As they bike away from the hole that I've dug for myself, the door next to me opens. It's Nadia, the girl I mistook for bringing me food, and her father Omar. The boys stare her down as she pushes the creaky wheelchair to the driveway, ostensibly so the corpse within it can get some rays.

This is the first time I've seen the old man in broad daylight. His face is a paste of gray, a contrast to its natural shade, which can still be seen down his arms and bare legs. A white cotton shirt hangs off hunched bones, and his black beard tells me what a full head of hair might have done for him. His fingers are shriveled, and he does not move his olive-shaded eyes up towards Nadia, or anything at all.

The boys pass by on their bikes, and Doug spits at the ground dividing him from the young girl. It doesn't faze her. Instead, she goes about making her father comfortable and drawing a handcrafted quilt across his sunken lap.

"Don't mind them," I call out to her. My voice startles the girl, as if she did not anticipate I would dare speak to her. "Some people in this country never learn to play nice."

She does not look at me, remaining fixated on the husk in front of her.

"Think nothing of it, missus," she says. "They are children who know nothing but the life they were given."

The same could be said for their parents.

"You can call me Sam. No need for the whole missus business." I say. "Aren't you a child, too?"

Sometimes, my mouth has a mind of its own.

"I was, once," she says. Still has not looked me in the eye. "Back home, in our country, we were children too. But war came. My father here, he was—how do you say it? —a watchmaker. He fixed clocks. Farhad helped him with the business. But then men came, burned the business. We fled. They said we would find a new home in America, but this? This will never be home to me."

Omar grunts. I can't see his face, as he watches the boys laughing down the street and looking back at him, but it prompts her to fall silent.

I step towards them. "Hi, Omar. My name is Saman—"

Nadia's eyes snap to me, her voice sharpening like a pointed pencil. "Please do not talk to him."

.“I’m sorry,” I say. My face is burning, and a slight panic has me wanting to run to bed and cry, but I stand my ground. “I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“The only women my father speak with are Mother and myself.”

My cheeks are a river of blood by now.

“Okay,” I reply. “Well, you two enjoy the sun. I am going to make myself scarce.” She says nothing as I back away, but I can feel that gaze, the connection I briefly sought with her, staring down my every step.

Nathan is in the kitchen, systematically drenching bread slices with peanut butter before he tosses the knife in the sink.

I kiss him on the forehead, which elicits a groan.

“Never change,” I tell him. “You’re one saint of a kid.”

Peter

IT ONLY TAKES A SINGLE moment to prove how ignorant about the real world you are. How much you may have underestimated people around you.

I underestimated Vic. The guns stashed under the futon. The drugs on his coffee table. The poster of a clenched fist on the living room wall, drenched in red- what I suspected to be the figurative blood of his white privilege oppressors.

He was a run-of-the-mill weed dealer. You meet dangerous people, pay dangerous people and stay on good terms with them. You don't harvest a political career from it, do you?

These questions drive me toward him, hungry for answers with none of the processes to digest them. Syd said not to ask, that he would tell me when I was ready, but when would that be?

Immediately, it turns out. The door opens, and Viktor Quinn, a redhead right down to smoldering eyes and charm that catches like fire on drapes, greets me with a grin. His usual attire- muscle shirt, track pants and sunglasses- have been replaced with a charcoal suit. Shirt ironed, tie straight. Red beard still the crustiest thing about him.

"Vic," I say, "you cleaned up for our date."

He strong arms me through the door and closes it behind us. "Got the cash?"

I hand it to him. "Set me up for a week, right?"

"What?"

"You told me if I met the weirdo with the dreadlocks, you'd set me up for a week. Remember?"

I could use it right now.

"Oh yeah, yeah, man. And they call that shit 'cultural appropriation'. The fuckin' nerve. Like you didn't come here and appropriate half the system on our dime. Believe it? Getting in a hissy fit over fucking hair!"

Viktor snorts and giggles.

I ask him why he's wearing a suit. Anything to change topic, because I know his tangents go on and I could be at home, hitting my bong, letting the waves of euphoria overtake me.

I'll come back to that topic.

"Look, turns out, we have somewhere to be tonight, Pete. I need to show you something I've been working on for the past couple months. I need someone I can trust." Vic pockets the cash after counting it several times and sniffles. "I can trust you, right?"

"Of course," I say, "You okay, man?"

"Yeah, yeah, why do you ask?" He pockets the cash and lights a smoke, pacing back and forth.

"You seemed worked up. And your nose? Bleeding a bit."

"Fuck," he says, dabbing his nostril, pulling his hand away to inspect the stain left up on it. He disappears into the bathroom to my right, speaking louder, lest I miss a word. "Too much coke. Got a speech to make tonight. You're gonna be there. You'll see. It is going to change the world. You and me, Pete. We're going to change it." He emerges, and gestures to the open concept living room on my left.

"Got you a suit. Put it on. We're leaving in five minutes."

The suit, something far more expensive than I could ever afford, is draped across Vic's couch, in a flimsy plastic cover. I take it to the bathroom, start undressing. Straightening the cuffs, tucking in shirttails, I suit up in a mirror, asking what I'm getting myself into.

My stomach is uneasy, trying to metabolize Jason's words. Viktor doesn't seem like the type to don pointy white hoods and robes and start bonfires on the bones of his enemies.

My daddy worked every day of his adult life, along with millions of others, to make this country great.

Syd's daddy, who beat his wife and cursed his daughter with a lifetime of trauma, built bridges and schools and the whole fucking universe.

Viktor raps on the door.

"Pete, let's go!"

It's time.

IT ONLY TAKES ONE MOMENT to realize being lost in a sea of people is no better than being lost in an actual sea. For one, the stench of a room full of pale-skinned dudes is unbearable.

For race-exclusive, this meeting does have a lot of economic diversity. Cattle ranchers, biker gangs, Wall Street types. Political aides type on Blackberry devices at the speed of sound, relaying

minutes of the meeting to their bosses who do not wish to be directly associated with the common rabble.

A stage erected out of cheap materials holds a lone microphone, while above it, stage lights are fixated on the mic stand. The public announcement system is old, likely second-hand, and emits random feedback every few loops.

The overhead lights dim as the stage lights are amped up, illuminating a lonely space. The crowd around me begins to applaud, a thundering ovation. Standing between them, arms by my side, I see Viktor take the stage.

"**How are we all doing tonight**?" he bellows into the microphone to another round of applause and whooping. "Those of you who don't know me, my name is Viktor Quinn, and I am supporting Rupert Smith for governor!"

A third standing ovation, this one the loudest, roars through the warehouse. The ground and walls around the crowd tremble.

"Six months ago, Rupert reached out to me through an intermediary, telling me about his plan. Now why me, you ask?

"I am a thirty-two year old convicted felon. I have been to jail five times and spent nearly a quarter of my life behind bars. So why would Rupert Smith, renowned local legend of the old telecom days, want to convene with a known criminal, at the very same time he was weighing a gubernatorial career?

Vic pauses, attention of the whole world on him.

"He said, '*Son*, we are going to make it possible for you to *thrive* again. We are going to take all these minorities, who have come for your potential, for your jobs and your taxes, and we are going to kick 'em out. We are going to make them pay to live here, not pay them!"

Another round of applause. When it cedes, Vic continues, pacing from one end of the stage to another.

"I have lived my entire life; told I could be anything I wanted. I could be a doctor, or a movie star, or the President of the United fucking States if I wanted to be. But where was the opportunity? Affirmative action doesn't include me. The housing market is trash. There are no jobs for the founding class anymore, and the bankers are too busy counting everyone else's money.

"I drive by a nice house in the suburbs, two out of three times it belongs to an Indian doctor who charges me five hundred dollars a doctor's visit when I can't fucking afford food on my table! He's

eating filet mignon. I'm eating goddamned ramen.

"What is the American dream today, like, really? They tell you we're a nation of immigrants, but immigrants of what? Are we all lumped together, the contributions of some who did nothing the same as those who gave everything? Did you come here to build a nation, or profit on its coattails?

"My friends," Vic smiles. "I welcome you. We are brethren and will help our brother Rupert succeed. First, to be governor. In four years from now, *President*!

"But to the invaders," he scowls, "we watch you every day, from when you leave your house to when you return at night. We have given you everything, and you only give us reasons to distrust you. This is *our* America. Our home! You are merely guests."

"What did you think?" asks a voice behind me as Vic bows and introduces his man of honor, Rupert Smith, to thundering applause.

Syd, standing behind me, whispering like a devil on my shoulder in the dark.

"I don't know what I think," I say.

"To be honest, I'm surprised he let you come along, Pete. Don't make us regret it."

Before I can reply, she disappears into the sea of faces, the only woman among them.

Rupert Smith is older than the last time I saw him, in a race for city council during the nineties. His hair has lost its color and turned dull gray. His attire reminds me of my grandad, with his checkered shirt, crewneck sweater, ugly green pants.

"Thank you all," he says. "It is such an honor to share this momentous occasion with you, my friends. Tomorrow morning, on the steps of the courthouse, I will announce my candidacy for governor. Thank you to those who have supported me until now."

My head is starting to ache from all this clapping.

"When I was a boy, my sister Melissa was raped by a foreigner. Afghan, Lebanese, I don't recall. But he was violent, and he was foreign! My sister had the gall to protect him, so I went to the police, being eight years old and not strong enough to go after the boy, or I might have!

"Those policemen went and had a strongly-worded conversation with the boy's mother, for he had no man in his life to set him straight. But that was all. For weeks, I fumed; *even after* my father, a man who had nothing but the utmost respect for the law, told me to

let it go.

"A week before I turned nine, I broke that boy's legs with a crowbar from my father's shed. The policemen came to my house this time, and my father whipped me until I could not walk. Told me he would drive me to the prison myself next time and leave me there!

"That sense of injustice never left me. How could a sweet, innocent girl be sexually denigrated and nothing be done? And when something *was* done, *I* was the criminal?"

Rupert Smith chews his next words.

"That was nearly sixty years ago. Now, the original citizens of this country are suffocated on paltry pensions when families from elsewhere are given thousands of dollars a year! That is not the system we created, is it?"

The crowd shouts and pounds in rabid agreement.

"My friends, when you look back on this night sixty years from now, you will remember it as the night you made a life-changing decision. To support Rupert Smith for Governor! To take control of our own destiny. Instead of a man like Hershel Reyes, whose *name* has come to not only be known for its Mexican heritage but lies, corruption and opening the floodgates to our great state. One I helped build half the telecommunications infrastructure for. Do we *really* want a man like Hershel Reyes infringing upon our rights?"

One final time, the crowd indulges him with applause and cheering and stomping. One last time, at least, I'm willing to stand here and absorb it in my bones, but Smith beats me to it with a raised fist.

"Let's take back America! Thank you!"

IT ONLY TAKES ONE MOMENT to realize a relationship is never going to be the same again. For my relationship with Viktor Quinn, that moment is now, outside between a door to the warehouse and a rusting, yellow Dumpster.

"Vic, what the fuck?" I ask.

"What the what?"

"What the fuck are we doing here, exactly?"

Vic hauls on his cigarette, blowing blue air back at me.

"Changing the fucking world, Pete. All these snowflakes and social justice warriors making it impossible for us, America's

fucking children, to live our lives the way we meant them."

"And what did we mean them to be, Vic?"

Viktor turns to the wall and unbuckles his belt, the copper-tinted cigarette filter hanging off his lips. "Sorry bro, gotta piss. And glorious is what they should, and will, be."

"By supporting a character like Rupert Smith? Vic, the guy looks at human beings and assigns them a value based off color! Do you really want to be around a guy like that?"

The stench of piss and garbage does not faze him, either literally or morally.

"And you *don't* do that, Pete?" he asks as the sound of his stream against the wall tapers off. "You don't have to lie to me."

"No, I don't."

"Rupert and I are more alike than we seem."

"Not contesting that part at all, Vic." I stop talking while he adjusts his pants. "How did you even end up with these views?"

"My daddy was an S.O.B. How about we say that? Pushed me up against a wall, grabbed my sister's ass cheek and downed a forty of Scotch. Beat my mother, blamed corporate America for his downfall because he had nobody better to pin it on." He lights another smoke. "Turns out, neither do I. I'm just not about to tell it to the bottom of a bottle, Pete. I'm going to be out *there*," he says, waving the cigarette in the air like a magic wand. "Manufacturing change."

"Manufacturing."

"Manu-fucking-facturing. People are too scared to embrace change on their own. I don't blame them, either. Change is a mindfuck. If you embrace change too late, you're a loser, man. Outnumbered. If you embrace change too early, though, you're a fucking terrorist. And we all know what they do to terrorists."

Words fail at the most inopportune times.

Vic continues. "So, Rupert and me, we're gonna play the game. We are going to mobilize the disenfranchised, wake up the populace. It's time to make a statement people won't be able to ignore. Provide a catalyst, if you will."

He stops pacing like a madman and stops beside me; I feel his arm slink around my shoulder, a decomposing cigarette right next to my eye.

"It all comes back to what I'm saying about embracing change. Everyone has to do it together, or you end up with losers and terrorists. And the only losers slash terrorists here? Not gonna be us,

Pete.

"Are you with me?"

If Vic loads his guns the way he loads his questions, somebody is going to get hurt.

It only takes one moment to realize your relationship is never what you thought it was.

"Sorry, Vic," I say, feeling the weight of each word dropping off my tongue. "I don't share this…philosophy of yours. Nothing personal. I don't mind running product for you, making drops for you, and smoking your shit with you, but this a step too far in another direction, man. I'm not looking to take some grand political stance here. You understand that, don't you?"

Disappointment drips off his brow alongside the beads of Vic's mania. Any former excitement on his face has fallen away, replaced with a quiet glare.

"I understand," he says. "You are not ready to embrace change, Peter. But it's coming, and I hope you remember what I said.

"Of course."

"Losers and terrorists, Pete."

"Yep. Loud and clear."

I just want to get away from here and run like hell.

"You can make your way back, can't you?"

"Sure," I reply, "Hey, I hope you know I didn't mean to offend you. It's just…. not for me, Vic."

"I understand, Peter. Safe travels."

It only takes one moment.

Samantha

World news is a bleak affair.

I used to care about it more. Politicians and bankers, warmongers and the common people who get sent to war when all hell breaks loose. There was a time I would pick up a newspaper and let its tendrils of fear pull me in. Once upon a time, it felt grand.

Now it's background noise. A talking head, poking at my patience for tax codes and healthcare. Another war hawk debating foreign policy with belligerent news anchors.

We're all going to die someday, right?

The street is quiet as my Jeep turns into the gated community. The houses, painted hideous variants of yellow and blue, are otherwise perfect and identical.

The problem is that all the people who moved here were cunts. Uptight couples with perfect hair and perfect children who preach the opposite of their image. Hate everyone who is not you. Respect thy neighbor, but not if he's different.

It was Derek who wanted this stupid house.

The radio host blathers on, talking about air strikes in foreign countries. I change the station, hoping for something less depressing, but it's too late. Pulling into my driveway, depression is already waiting for me.

Derek may be my husband on paper, but he's a walking corpse to me. He always looked terrible in pink, but his new girlfriend seems to like the shirt on him. He would never wear it otherwise.

He waves as I approach the driveway like it's not been months since we sat on our bed, and he told me about another woman.

He doesn't even let me out of the car before opening his mouth.

"Hi, Sam," he says.

"You better have a good reason for being here, Derek, or I will regret not running you down."

He nods, staring at his feet.

"Fair."

I open the back door, grab the enormous purse I received from

my mother the Christmas before he left me, and slam it shut.

"What the *fuck* do you want?"

"Sorry," he says. "I know there's not a whole lot I can say Samantha, except…I'm really sorry."

"Great. Is that all you came to say, or would you like to ruin my day some more? Because for every second you make me stand here, I have less control over my actions."

Derek reaches into his back pocket and retrieves a long manila envelope, symmetrically folded. He turns it over in his hands.

My eyes are on fire. My hands want to shake, wring his neck and stab him, simultaneously.

"I came to ask you to sign these divorce papers. I don't want to make a big thing of it. You will receive financial support, full ownership of the house—"

I can't do this.

"You think I give a *fuck* about your divorce papers? Huh? You couldn't have served me, instead of showing up here like a *fucking asshole?*"

"Sam, please. I just want—" He tries to offer me the envelope, but my hand instinctively brushes it away.

"Get that shit away from me! I'm not signing anything. You can keep your whore in the islands. You can keep your big, fancy career. Hell, take the house if you want to move in with that whore. You aren't getting my name on any of it!"

"Sam, please don't do this. I don't want Nathan to see us fight like this."

Mentioning my son's name is the straw that breaks the camel's back. I reach for that pretty pink collar and grab as much of it as my hand will fit, and push my full weight into his, pulling the fabric as far as it will go.

Derek yells, pulled down with my sinking fist, but I have no mind to let go.

"Sam, what the *hell?*"

"You know what amazes me, Derek? That you don't talk about our son because, 'Hey, I miss my kid', but because you don't want him to think of you as the *bad guy*. Am I right?"

"Sam, let me go!"

"Well let me tell you something, *Derek,*" I say, pulling at the shirt until I hear the sweet sound of ripping silk threads. "You're no fucking saint. I just put my miserable husk of a mother in the

ground. My son will not speak to me because he thinks I drove you out. Your penis did, but he thinks it was me. Sure, money has been hell, and the neighborhood kids think I'm a raving lunatic, and Clarice next door keeps cutting into my hedges, but I'm not going to completely lose it today? Know why?"

I lean in, and whisper in his ear, lest it be the final intimacy between us.

"I'm going to destroy you in a courtroom. And then I'll sign your divorce papers. You'll be lucky if they let you onto an island after that, with all those rags you'll be wearing."

I release my grip on him. He stumbles back, landing on his backside on the steps of the house he once wanted so badly. Right where he wrapped his arms around me, kissed me, and said the future was bright.

Looks like cheap fertilizer and dead grass now.

"You're a psychopath," he says, scrambling to his feet. The flawless, pressed shirt has crumbled to creases and the faint outline of my chipped nails.

"And you're a scumbag. Get off my lawn and we'll call it even."

Derek retreats. In all probability, he's cursing me as he climbs into his black Prius. Speeding away, the crumpled manila envelope is left to decay on my lawn.

I walk past it and through the door of my house, trying to make sense of the last five minutes and where it fits into the chaos of life, only to come face to face with my son.

His face drained as the colors from fall, and unkempt hair can't cover knives in his stare enough.

"Honey—"

He turns from me, bolting up the stairs towards his room, three flights up, where I will become just another noise drowned out by his PlayStation.

Yuke, shaking the sleep from his bones, dawdles his way down the stairs as I collapse on the lowest one, burying the full weight of my brain in both hands. My thick brown locks fall over my face, burying any expression, or violent tears, that a hungry cat might see.

Peter

It only takes one moment to realize the ideals you thought someone held were just socially acceptable white lies.

I was never under the impression Viktor Quinn and Syd Mayhew were anything other than trailer-trash, gun-wielding drug dealers. I mean Syd had a job, but neither struck me as political in their pursuits. All Vic ever seemed to do was peddle pot, snort lines and talk shit.

Walking home along the side of a dark road, thousands of free-blowing reeds enveloping any sense of direction, my thoughts move like tired feet, trudging through gravel and waiting for some phantom car to hit me.

Even if Rupert Smith could win governor, what is possibly in it for them? I don't see Vic putting on a tie every morning, going to work with coffee in hand. Enforcer, maybe? Resident lunatic?

The road in front of me brightens. Looking back, I match the distant sound of spinning tires to twin headlights closing in on me, slowly as it narrows the distance between us.

I face forward and keep walking, even as Syd's creaking Chevrolet rolls to a stop, and Viktor's head hangs from the lowered window.

"Need a ride, stranger?"

Syd smirks in the driver's seat beside him. His tie is pulled loosely around his collarbone, his beard shaken with the wind.

"I can make it," I say, eyeballing two silhouettes in the back seat, hidden by shadows. "It's a beautiful night."

"I insist," Vic says, "We're all going the same way."

The car groans as Syd brakes, shuddering to a stop. The back door opens and one of the silhouettes has hands, grabbing hold of me as if I'm weightless and pulling me inside, over his lap and into the middle seat. The door shuts, and I am trapped beside two rather large men. One has a meticulously braided goatee, the other completely hairless, save for some very bushy eyebrows.

"Let's roll, Syd."

The Chevy lurches forward. Its engine chugs and sputters, but

then picks up speed. Vic lights a cigarette, and the car fills with a thick cloud.

"Sorry for all the grandstanding back there, Pete. A wise man once told me to know your audience. But we all know audiences can be fickle, so here I am.

"It's fine," I say, despite it being anything but. Are they going to kill me? I have never been in Syd's car before, but it smells as I would think, like two gorillas crushing my lungs between their ribs.

Vic scoffs, ashing in an old coffee cup.

"Thank you for saying that. It was an earful, I'm sure. But tell me, Pete. How long have you been out of work now? How long since Angie left you for being laid off?"

"Two years."

"Two years. And we've known each other, what? Just over a year?"

"Fourteen months, give or take."

"Fourteen months," he repeats, "Pete, I have struggled my entire life. I have struggled with the generation of working class Americans who can't get jobs because of quotas and reparations and affirmative action, who can't buy houses because of real estate bubbles and saturated foreign investment. I have struggled with the policies of these so-called lawmakers who open the floodgates and let scores of refugees in, who only come to drain the system you and I depend on.

"I don't give a shit about the Confederacy or slavery or any of that. I give a jack about the average fucking Joes who are subsidizing motherfuckers from Africa and the middle East to live on our dime. To take our jobs. To eat our food. To deal our bags. We go into these countries selling freedom and the honest-to-God American flag, but these Saharan types ain't buying. So we rick-roll them.

"Rupert is going to change all that."

"Yeah? And what's in it for you?" I ask. "Why do all this, Vic? Is Smith going to give you a university degree and a living? A house in the suburbs? A plaque?"

Vic takes a long haul from his cigarette, almost down to the filter now, staring off into the dark night. Syd, along with her backseat accomplices, has been quiet. She stares at me in her rearview.

"Not all of us are in the game for material gain, Peter."

“See, what *game*? Is that what that is to you?”

The Chevrolet stops suddenly. The entire frame shivers at its newfound inertia. Vic pushes the door open as the thug to my left opens his and drags me from my human sandwich with not a word.

Vic beckons my captor to pass me off to him. He grabs the back of my shirt and pushes me forward into the field, his friends following closely.

“Where are we going, Vic?” I ask, but all I receive in response is pushing hands, forcing me forward, ever deeper into the night.

The stars are in full view, a smiling constellation taunting me with the irony of being trapped between reeds taller than me.

If there was ever a place to hide a body, this is it.

I repeat the question, but Vic tells me to keep walking, only stopping me briefly to light a new cigarette. The prodding resumes.

I think of my mother, who will probably be the one to claim me, if I'm ever found. She is near seventy and chain smokes, sipping whisky in a wheelchair from her dead father’s flask. His engraved initials are just visible, faded with the years.

It is minutes, which in turn feels like hours, before Viktor speaks again.

“This is it.”

An open field, underneath the stars, stretches far as the black horizon. The air is dead here. Whatever wind the night possessed was knocked out of it. This is where Viktor Quinn has decided to end my life, standing next to his hired muscle and Syd, silver revolver in his waist.

Vic chuckles, stretching his arms. Despite a view to the back of his head, the devil in his eyes emanates through the open field.

“This is the spot we make history, my friends.”

The bald one, whom I’ve privately named Barney, cozies up to my personal space, as if he’s seen the wind in my legs and stands ready to strike me down. The braided one, henceforth known as Larry, lights a smoke, hoping it relieves the boredom on his face.

“Light a fire,” Vic commands.

“How?” Larry says. “No forests or fucking trees for miles around.”

“Funny,” Vic says.

“Serious, boss,” Barney replies. “How we supposed to build a fire without wood?”

“I see a field full of crops. I see a book of matches there in your

hand. Light a fucking fire."

"You want us to burn down some poor farmer's crops?"

"That don't seem right, boss."

"Yeah, he's gonna call the cops, and then I'm in jail for the night. My lady would not like that one bit."

"Would one of you idiots just burn the fucking field?" Syd snaps, pacing a couple steps below frantic, arms crossed like the label on a bottle of poison.

"You heard the lady," Vic says, breaking the next fifteen seconds of fear left to drip through the air like mildew.

Larry looks to Barney for validation, down at the book of matches in his hand, then back to Barney, who nods his reluctant support.

"Go on," Vic says. "It's a really dry year. Fire bans in effect all over the fucking place. It's gonna burn like a nursery."

"Why are we doing this, again?" I ask. The first words I am able to muster are probably the worst ones. The voice of reason always gets himself killed.

"Why don't you shut up," Syd replies curtly, "and just let history happen, Pete?"

"Syd," Vic says, "it's okay, baby."

He cozies up to side of me, filling the encroaching void Barney has left to assist Larry in committing arson. His arm slithers around my shoulders like a cobra, pulling me closer like I'm his prey.

"Walk with me."

The stars all around us seem to be able to breathe better than the mortals under this humid cloud. The air is dry and heavy, thickening with every step taken further into the open field.

"There's a reason I brought you into this, you know. It's not just because you're good looking."

"You can spare me the flattery, Viktor. Maybe you had me wrong, and I'm just not your guy, maybe. You know?"

Vic stops, removes his slithering arm from around me, and uses both hands to turn me back to where we emerged from the reeds, as if forcing me to watch an execution.

"Ideals only take you so far, Peter. They don't protect the people you love. They don't keep you safe or put food on your table. Morality has no place in survival. Same way consumerism has no bearing on prosperity. It's like a machine. Kill or be killed. Fuck or be fucked. Two men walk in, only one is coming out. Understand?"

“Sure,” I reply. “What does that have to do with where we are?”

As I say the words, they engulf the reeds behind us, and smoke blots out the heavens like ink, spreading like a falling blanket.

Larry jumps back into Barney’s stunned expression, and they both stumble away from the ignition point. Orange eclipses endless darkness before it darkens to a dull red.

The burning fields crackle like my underlying panic and Viktor gazes off at his girlfriend, admiring the beast in the flames, as if he has given her a gift. Close enough to risk smoke inhalation and minor burns, she reaches out as if to pet the fire like a beaten dog.

“You asked me what I wanted, Peter?” Vic asks, fixated on Syd. “I want to remind the world their precious equality does not, in turn, make us unequal. That we are a force to be reckoned with. I want to leave the world protected from those who would make it a ‘better place’.”

“You’re starting to sound like a super villain, you know.”

My response must warrant eye contact, finally, because Viktor breaks sight with his artwork.

“How so?”

“Don’t get me wrong. We all have daddy issues, Vic. But I’ve read enough stupid comic books to know you don’t have to take a swim in vats of acid to do fucked up shit. Like *this*. All you need is some twisted sense of injustice and a book of matches, and you’re a villain.”

Vic scoffs, relieving me of his momentary attention span and looking back to Syd.

“We’re all villains, Peter. Only some of us are still pretending heroes exist. I’m not. I gave up on fairy tales a long time ago. Humanity, shortly after.”

“So, burning down half the countryside is going to bring that back, Vic? What the fuck are we doing here?”

“Making a point.”

“What point?”

“Everyone wants to be equal, Peter. The guy from the Middle East, who arrives with his wife and ten fucking children, fresh off the boat, presumes to be equal as the red-blooded Americans who built this country. The kid from the hood, who carries a nine in the waistband of his sweat pants, complains he doesn’t have the same chances after he robs the corner store. All these liberal cucks stand up for the very people who would lead us to ruin. There’s no

fucking equality. It's shut up and be led to slaughter or be publicly humiliated for your views.

"No. Fuck that. There's you and me, and there's them. If they want to work together for a common end, fine, but I'm never putting the safety back on. I'm a cautious person to the end."

Vic brought me here to make a point, but he's using the dull edge of a knife. I let my face be warmed by the inferno, hearing fire engines in the distance wailing in our direction.

"Fire is the only thing that doesn't discriminate, Pete. It doesn't care what it touches or destroys. Everything has a burning point."

"What does that mean?"

Vic makes eye contact again, but this time I really wish he hadn't.

"If it's equality these people want, they're gonna have to know it's not free," he says, and I know that response, and its corresponding gaze, will never leave me. "See what true sacrifice entails."

It only takes one moment for your entire life to change dramatically, and that moment is now; an accessory to arson, standing at the precipice of hate's river and wondering if I'm too weak to resist the current that has carried these people away.

And Viktor Quinn, goading me to jump before I'm pushed headlong into the cold waters.

Samantha

I never wanted to get old.

When you're young, mistakes are just that. Mistakes. Humps in the road. A challenge to be overcome. Nobody will take your house. The bank won't be waiting in the shadows to repossess your car.

When you're young, thinking you know what true loneliness is, a mistake is nothing, because the idea of cause and effect is still just a classroom theory. As you get older, people learn how to think for themselves, beyond the hormonal popularity contest that is high school politics, but it comes with self-absorption and isolationism.

Freddie Conway is the embodiment of those traits. A black man, adopted by a poor white family, and the only person I have known as long as my ex-husband. He is grizzled now. Stress of the years run through his thick beard in streaks of grey. His back is no longer that of the rugby star, carrying a hunch which diminishes his six feet greatly.

The only thing in the world Freddie owns is a backwater street chip wagon and his Honda, which doubles as his twin-sized bed. It was all the ex-wife offered after family court took him to town for five kids he never sees, all in their teens and twenties.

I always told Derek if Esmeralda and her children could see how Freddie lived, they would feel great shame.

When you are old, mistakes are harder to avoid. Freddie likes to cook his, and I tend to eat mine. Once in a while, those coping strategies align, just outside his paint-chipped kitchen.

A hot stack of smoke erupts from the open window, carrying the comforting smells of hot dogs and potatoes from their metal prison. I can see Freddie's compromised silhouette limping from end to end, muttering obscenities between missing teeth.

The side door swings open, near-ricocheting off its rusted hinges, playing table tennis with a perpendicularly-placed iron-cast barrel, just beside two small propane tanks. One is turned on its side, probably kicked over earlier.

Freddie stumbles down the steps, holding a charred pot of yellow oil between soggy rubber mitts.

“My stars!” he says, “Knew I shouldn’t have listened to that damn salesman! Fire everywhere!” He pours the thick oil into the barrel, steam pouring upward like the oil is belching it. “Motherfucker!”

“Suppose it will be a few for the fries?” I say.

“Sam!” Freddie exclaims. “Sorry dear, I’d hug you, but you’d burn. Ain’t a look for such soft skin.” He finishes emptying the oil and kicks the barrel for good measure. “Sumbitch salesman sold me a new fryer. All it does is start fuckin’ fires.”

“If it’s any consolation,” I reply. “I caught my son torching ladybugs with a can of mosquito spray and a lighter.”

“Sounds like boyhood, dear.”

“He looks pretty funny without eyebrows, but I don’t know. Kid’s got issues, thanks to his father.”

Freddie drops the pot on the pavement, reaches in his cook’s smock and retrieves a bent, crumpled cigarette.

“Man giving you trouble?” He fumbles through deep pockets, finds nothing, and gestures to me. “Got a light for an old-timer?”

“You’re not that old,” I say, pulling a pink lighter from my purse and placing it in his palm, which is callused and scaly. “We graduated high school together. If you’re old, I’m ancient.”

Freddie hands the lighter back and takes a long drag of the cigarette. The white smock is caked in orange grease.

“You haven’t answered the question, my dear.”

All I can think of is Derek, wearing that pink dress shirt, falling to the ground, then running back into the arms of Islands Bitch. Intercut that with images of him making love to me, saying I was the one, and it’s a fucking Shania Twain song.

“Feels I’m the one giving *him* trouble.” I accept his silence as encouragement and tell him about Derek showing up on my lawn, the divorce papers that washed away in the next day’s rain, and the tweenaged turds who found them and threw them in Nathan’s face, laughing.

“He’ll get his, someday,” Freddie says. “Known the man twenty years. Known you eighteen of them twenty. When we were young, ain’t never see a love like yours and his, Sam. Would have never pegged him for an adulterer. Then again, would have never pegged my son Jason for a pot dealer. Derek will get his, you watch.”

“I’m starting to believe there’s some statute of limitations on karma.”

Freddie takes another long drag, then pulls the filter from his mouth. Smoke escapes where his lower teeth used to be even before he exhales.

"Ain't no statute of limitations on being a cunt," he says. "Listen, I know I was a bad husband. I was a worse father. My kids, for better or worse, won't ever speak to me again. And dear, there are days that is *all* because of Esmeralda. But mostly, it's because of my own choices. All because I drank too many times and hit her. All because I scared them and gave that woman some holy-ass ammunition to use against me when the chips were down.

"I never professed to be a saint, Sam. But having my children disown me is the closest thing to death I could ever feel while alive."

"Keep updates on them, I'm guessing?"

Freddie nods. "Like I said, Jason is in a bad way, hanging out with some kid who never talks. I used to get harassed, being the only black kid in this town, so it affords me some goodwill with the blues. Joe Riker locked up my son on a possession charge, then Nick Vance busted him for breaking probation. I'm worried."

"Three strikes."

"Three strikes, indeed. Maybe prison will sort him out. But you never see the white kids getting busted like the black ones do. Shame the lessons only apply to some."

The thought of Nathan in an orange jumpsuit, serving life for the most minute of crimes, chills my blood. He would not last five years.

"How about the others?" I ask. "Any good news there?"

"They're all good news. Emily just had her second child. I still haven't met the first one, but there's hope. Maybe."

"Well congratulations, Grandpa. Boy?"

"Girl. Both of them. Their aunt Shanice still sends me texts. Doesn't reply to mine, so I only get the snippet, but it's better than nothing."

So much sadness for what should be celebrated. He finishes smoking and beckons me to follow him inside the wagon. The smell of old oil permeates my sinuses but the warmth of this place comforts me. Photos of his children are hung above the prep area, mostly dated and frayed around their frames, so positioned that his customers don't see him looking at them.

"Thinking about moving closer to the Boulevard," Freddie says,

referring to the main street that runs through town. “Ever since they closed up shop at the factory, clientele’s thinned.”

“Still the best dogs this side of town,” I say. “Always got my business, Freddie.”

“See,” he says, pulling a bag of fries from a rickety freezer under the prep counter, “if everyone was like you, I’d be rich, Sam. But I ‘been on this lot for eight years and it’s getting hard to justify the expense. All that comes through here now are weary travelers with miserable children, and those supremacists off Lord Street.”

“Supremacists?”

“Yeah,” he replies. “Didn’t hear? Rupert Smith is getting in the public arena. Announced it yesterday at the old court house.”

“I don’t follow local politics.”

“I like to keep my ear to the ground, is all. Smith has a lot of traction, and there are a lot of easily-influenced people nowadays, especially youngsters. I wasn’t around for the Civil Rights, or none of that, but I know a hustler when I see one, and Smith is hustling.”

“What makes you think white supremacy, though? I mean, a guy like Rupert Smith must have a reputation or two to uphold, no?”

“When you’re seventy-something, I don’t think ‘failed telecom mogul’ sits well. These guys, with their old money and arrogance get into politics, and bring some old-money and pretty arrogant viewpoints with them.”

“Saying Smith is a racist, Freddie?”

“I’m saying that money can buy a lot of support.”

“So that means he’s funding white supremacy?”

Freddie stops prepping and looks me dead in the eyes. I trust him, but I’m not ready to accept our country is this fucking corrupt.

Despite all evidence to the contrary, of course.

“No. Not funding it. But he’s not stopping it, either. And the people who share these views, it doesn’t matter how much or how few of those views Rupert Smith holds himself. All that matters is they believe he holds them. You watch, dear.”

“Well, I’ll cancel my cable subscription as soon as I get home, then.”

Freddie disapproves.

“Sarcasm is the lowest form of humor,” he says, lowering the basket of fries into the bubbling oil. “Let’s hope this sumbitch works this time. Just fries to go?”

“As always.”

Freddie closes the top and lapses into a staring contest with the machine, watching it, ever ready to extinguish another bad batch.

"What should I do about Derek, Freddie?" I don't mean to ask the question, but it's been on the tip of my tongue, waiting for someone I trust enough.

"Remind me what you told him?" he asks.

"That I would take him for everything he's worth."

"That's after he gave you the house, right?"

"House, offers of support, and a son who refuses to look at me because *I'm* the bad guy."

"Sign the papers, dear."

"Not the same."

"Same as what, exactly? Destroying a man because he stuck his penis in another woman, the thing all men are capable of doing?"

"Some husbands are shittier than others."

"Yeah? Take it from a shitty husband, Sam. You are angry, but anger doesn't come from a place of hate. It comes from a place of love. Love that's been stomped over, taken out back and shot like Old Yeller. But that anger will do far more harm to you and Nathan than it ever will to him."

I know he's right.

I *hate* that he's right.

If I wanted the truth, I would have gone somewhere else.

"It would feel good, though."

"No doubt. But I have done way worse than Derek ever could to you, and objectively, it's not great. But the problem with courts is they were designed to emasculate fatherhood; bleed men dry at the mother's behest. Esmy did it to me. My wages are still garnished for Alecia and Cal. Every dollar this place makes, I'm left with five cents.

"Point is, dear, I watched the woman I married at nineteen turn into a hateful, shriveled witch who has destroyed anything I had left after fucking up everything else. All to appease some holier-than-thou anger stored carelessly inside her."

I never wanted to grow old, because these are the mistakes people never escape. Once the Dereks and Esmeraldas of the world find you, and sink their claws in, mistakes have a face and name.

Driving home, the smell of Freddie's fries saturating my car, a peace washes over me for the first time since Catherine died. Like a red light holding up traffic on the Boulevard, all my mania comes to

a rolling stop.

Peter

IT ONLY TAKES ONE MOMENT to shatter a dream's spell over you. The kaleidoscope of random ideas is severed before reaching their zenith, and before you know it, you've gone from dreaming of talking food to Syd Mayhew on a chair pulled up to your bedside.

"Morning, Pete," she says, and the switchblade handle twirling between her fingers comes into focus. Everything behind her is blur—the outline of my dresser, the old metal band posters above my wall. All this suggests I am still dreaming.

"Why are you here?" I ask, bolting up in bed. "Is Viktor out there?"

"Vic's not here, Pete."

"Why are you here?" I repeat, but my voice no longer sounds like my own. It is light and breathless. I try to leave the bed, plant my feet on solid ground, because only then I will be certain I am awake or fast asleep.

Neither leg moves.

"Vic needs you to do something for him."

I check with my plastic-banded watch. "Syd, it's eight in the morning."

"I'm sorry. Would you rather I tell Vic you asked me to come back at a more appropriate time, Pete? What else do you have to do?"

A thousand more appealing things come to mind. I still feel the fanning flames of last night, baked into my cheeks, Viktor Quinn's glare, into my mind.

"No," I sigh. "What does he want me to do?"

Syd pockets the knife with a wry smile, making sure my eyes never leave it.

"Vic wants to send a message."

"Didn't we just kind of send one by setting some random field on fire?"

"Oh, Pete," Syd replies, "So naive. Do you think we would just burn some random-ass field, without purpose?" Not much surprises me this week. "That was a farm. Belongs to a man named Reza Baqri, who moved in and swept it up for a pretty penny a couple

years ago. Outbid a born-and-raised local by ten grand. *Ten grand*, Pete. Lance did go onto buy another farm, but the indignation? I couldn't imagine."

"I don't know," I say, finally brave enough to swing my naked legs over the bedside, "Sounds like this Baqri guy won fair and square."

"An opportunity he would have never had otherwise."

"Well, there are farms in the Middle East, aren't there?" Something about bringing out her inner psycho gives me an unhealthy satisfaction. "So, what are we doing today, then?"

"*You* are going to send a message."

"We covered this part. To whom?"

"A Syrian watchmaker who has recently come into town, looking to cover up his association with genocidal generals back home by posing as a refugee."

"Sounds like an honest day's work. What does the message say?"

"It says none of your fucking business, Peter. You drive to his house, knock on his door, and you give it to him. Then, you drive away and go back to this pathetic little life you've built yourself. I mean, white curtains? Really?"

"I do alright," I quip, "Should I bring, um, protection?"

"Protection? As in a gun?" I nod back in response, and she squints as if I've grown two extra heads. "Are you stupid?"

"You're the one who said he's in bed with monsters. What if he attacks me?"

Syd chuckles. "You've got the mistrust. That's good. But no, he's not going to do anything. He's a fucking refugee, Peter, and a piss-poor one that. Vic's boys at the airport flagged his whole family off the plane. Didn't even bother to cover their tracks that well. Lucky as shit they let him go, because the U.S. government would be all over them like herpes on a dick.

"No, Farhad Anawi is not going to endanger himself or his family over a white-trash courier who would otherwise spend his whole damn day in bed."

"That's some great motivation, Syd."

"Glad to help. Now get your ass moving."

THE NEIGHBORHOOD SYD and Vic have sent me to looks and smells like my childhood. The houses are identical, lawns well-kept.

Serenity is only occasionally broken by a screaming fire engine or shrieking children. No, the plague of construction and eighteen wheelers in reverse don't exist here like they do downtown outside my loft, shattering any restful sleep I could hope to get.

My youth was happy, mostly, devoid of anything broken except my favorite toys and the odd, short-lived promise. Dad worked at the factory in town, assembling car parts that would ship across the border six or seven times before each was finished. His job was phased out because of machines, not immigrants, and he died of lung cancer when I was fourteen years old.

For the last seven years of his life, he was absent from mine.

Mom was a homemaker, back when it was the norm. She doesn't have a feminist bone in her body, content to wear frivolous dresses adorned in flowers and chain-smoke from the time we woke until the time we slept.

I don't talk to my siblings anymore. Kate is my mother's anathema, wearing pantsuits for every occasion. Spencer is a lawyer, and probably the only one who will ever amount to something. Bonnie has four kids of her own, each with a different man. She lives off food stamps and welfare with her new boyfriend in California.

And here I am, Peter Richard York, my mother's youngest, sitting outside a stranger's house, hands shaking to contain the blank envelope in them. My rusted blue Honda groans its agreement or begs for an oil change before irreversible damage is done. I let it idle, smoke pouring out the back pipe, watching the kids circle on their bikes at the street's end.

I exhale the breath I've been holding onto.

Showtime.

THE HOUSE IS IDENTICAL to those which surround it. Cheap white panels are painted over in roughshod blue. Uncle Pat was a tradesman, and taught me a couple things in his day, before he keeled over and died of a massive coronary. It wasn't the heart attack that killed him, though. Falling three stories while shingling a roof did not help. Neither did the gin on his breath at six in the morning.

My heart pounds against my ribs, and I feel every last one dancing with panic.

How did I get roped into this, again?

A group of kids circling on bicycles and laughing are the only sounds disturbing this corner of the world, where every house has a driveway and each of those are filled with vehicles that put my shitbox to shame.

Overwhelming anxiety is cut short by the boys behind me yelling and the clatter of dropped bikes on the pavement. I turn back to see several kids swarm a younger boy- calling him faggot, calling him reject, one of them heaving him backwards into a receding grass patch.

The kid, in trying to defend himself, raises his arms to protect the head, but is unable to sustain the onslaught of fists and fury in his direction. He yells and falls to his knees again, when I launch myself into the mob, blocking the blows small fists intend to deliver.

The boy on the ground writhes, does not look up.

"*Hold up*!" I yell, arms raised at my sides, palms rigid. I don't know what drives me but instinct. Adrenaline. Fear. "No idea what this kid has done that compels you all to savagely attack him, but it's kind of fucking cowardly, now, don't y'all agree?"

"And who the fuck are you, bozo?" says one.

"Yeah, we've never seen you around here!"

"Fuck off," says a third.

"I am," I reply, thinking of a legitimate reason to be in this suburban garden patch, where everyone probably knows each other's names, "the adult in this situation, because none of you seem to have parents within arm's reach. So, as one adult to a bunch of teenagers beating the daylights from this poor soul, *back the fuck off."*

Dismayed at my intervention, the kids migrate back toward their bikes, one by one, leaving me alone with the crumpled boy on his lawn.

"You're okay, now," I say, offering him my hand. He grabs it and I hoist his small body to its feet, helping him brush the dirt from the back of a tattered sleeve. "They won't bother you again."

The boy pouts, staring forward.

"You don't believe me," I say, "but they'll think twice before messing with you a second time." He still says nothing, but I've earned the privilege of his scratched and bleeding gaze. "What's your name?"

He speaks like a mouse, meek and easily intimidated.

"Nathan." The boy clears his throat of the tears which choke him, and tries again, this time more clearly. "Nathan Wallace."

I look back at the condo with ugly yellow trim and a quiet facade that I was supposed to descend upon, hand-delivering a note full of what I presume to be bigotry and hatred to an alleged terrorist. Then, back to the boy, a reflection of myself.

"Well Nathan Wallace, I'm Peter. I don't feel like I should say my last name. Is this your house?" He nods. "You should go inside and clean up. Some of that shit's gonna bruise. You want to put ice on that cheek. Not gonna be a fun ride for your face over the next couple weeks.

"Also," I say, moving toward my car, pushing on the failing fob on my keychain to unlock it, "and I don't expect you to make nice with those kids, but if we could the fact that I was ever here, a secret? We'll be even then, how about that?"

The door does not unlock. I thumb the key into the lock, which jams as I forcefully struggle to turn it. The kid's eyes burn into the side of my face, as I desperately shimmy the key to and from.

"You know, kid, some causes just are not worth it. You live your life one way, expecting people to act a certain manner, and they are totally just...fucking lunatics."

Now I am officially a crazy person, albeit one that has managed to jimmy his lock open and open the creaking blue door of my brother's old Honda. I climb into the driver's seat, slamming the door shut and speeding away.

His face never changes.

....

I DIDN'T DO IT.

Will Vic know? How will he react? I can already feel a gun against my temple, hear my prayers, sense Syd's smirk behind me as her boyfriend buries a couple rounds in my cerebral cortex.

I could be wrong, observing the flashing scenery of amber lights and distant sirens wailing as I gun past them. The Accord shudders and sasses me with every diligent turn.

I thought I was a dead man last night, and they didn't murder me, leave me to be found when the smell of decomposing flesh finally made it past the reeds.

Would they even know? I doubt some Syrian watchmaker will

notice the difference in his day. I could tell Vic the note is delivered. But then, how would I know the man's reaction to the envelope's contents?

What did Syd say, again?

Y*ou drive to this house, you knock on his door, and you give it to him. Then, you drive away and go back to this pathetic little life you've built yourself.*

This is not the life I asked for.

Angie wanted a better life for us. She saw something in me not even I saw, which turned out to be the demise of our relationship after seven years. That I could end up running errands for these monsters would break her fucking heart.

The sirens draw closer, but not so close I can see them. Still, I stick to the right. If an ambulance comes roaring behind me, I may not notice it until it's too late to move aside.

The morning rush has passed, but stragglers are still abundant, sleepily navigating the four lanes of this main road in a backwater town that deserves no name. When I was a kid, this was Main Street. Council got it in their head at some point they wanted something flashier and renamed it First Street.

Not much improvement, if you ask me.

The sirens fade into the opposite direction as I pull into the parking lot of the duplex where Angie and I started our life together. Eight years after moving out of my mother's house, I am still here. Angie lives with her new boyfriend in his fancy house, driving a fancy car in fancy suits.

Two years, I have lived alone and driven alone, the ghost of her laugh occupying me.

One night since I helped burn down some poor immigrant's field, and an envelope is the most emotional connection I've felt in many months.

On impulse, I reach for the envelope, tearing off a sliver at the end, enough to see what's inside. For Farhad's eyes only, a small, folded piece of paper lazes at the bottom, calling out my Christian name.

The paper in my hands is light, unlike the heart in my chest. I unfold it, disappointed to find a single typed line where I expected a raging manifesto.

A website short link. I cannot comprehend the syntax of random letters and symbols, so I retrieve my cell phone and plug it into the

search bar.

I may have just signed my death warrant, and the last person to ever speak to me was a teenager I saved from having the piss kicked out of him.

Fear and love are the same thing.

Samantha

Parenthood is a bleak affair.

One minute, your babes are small, knowing all the safety of the world is in your arms. Their dreams become your dreams, their best qualities a reflection of you, their worst ones your fault.

Nathan was almost a perfect child. He may not look it, with his long, greasy hair and Eeyore demeanor, but colicky babies were folk tales you heard about from neighbors. He did not cry or become overtly disobedient as a toddler. You never came home to find shit drawn down the walls like brown Crayola that will never come off, even with the most vigorous scrubbing and the best soap money can buy.

One minute, it all seems like a fairy tale.

The next, you find your babes on the dead lawn, cross-legged and despondent., Bruises cover everywhere on his beautiful face and blood dries on the lip.

“Oh, my Jesus,” I say, bolting out of my Jeep, disregarding the door left swinging on its hinges. I get on my knees in front of the curb, trying to touch every part of his head and torso, checking for broken bones or fractures. My baby’s face darkens, but nothing like his eyes have. “Nathan! Honey, what happened?”

His voice is so quiet and cold, I want to bury my head in his arms to show him a glimpse of warmth, but that isn’t the solution, Sam.

“Nathan? Answer me.”

“What do you think happened, Mom?”

I know the answer, but I need to hear it. I need my son’s testimony before I put Chester Holmes, Chris Thompson and the rest of those little shitheads six feet under.

I ask him to confirm it.

Nathan nods, squints and struggles to swallow. A small gash and dirt where a boot appeared to kick him has left his neck a swollen mess.

“They just attacked me. I came out to get some air because Yuke left dander everywhere in my room. Doug saw me first, then Charlie

charged—" He stops at the first sign of wavering, trailing off. "This guy, I don't know, he broke them up. Got them off me."

"Who?"

Nathan shakes his head.

"Okay, baby, it's okay," I say, taking him in my arms and rocking him. I soothe him, but my blood pressure is a steam engine, and this locomotive is full fucking steam ahead. "I want you to go inside and lock the door. Okay?"

When I am sure he is gone, my feet carry me like wind, blacking out every individual step the three doors down to Chris Thompson's house. It is every way identical to my own, save for beautiful vegetation and proper general maintenance. So many times, I've caught Stacy Thompson staring at me. She's a stay-at-home wench, one of those blondes who looks over the top of her sunglasses at you, disparaging your status as a human being to the other neighbors later over tea.

She's not gardening today, which gives me the right amount of courage to stomp through her flowerbed making my way up to the door.

Trying to keep rage fresh, I pound mercilessly on the doorbell, relishing each faint chime behind the pristine white paint of her door. A plaque bearing the name Thompson stares back at me as I wait.

Stacy answers the door, wearing pink spaghetti straps and yoga attire, her razor straight teeth permanently carved into a condescending smile.

"Samantha! So nice to see—"

"Save me the pleasantries, you whore."

Her smile drops off her face so fast, blinding white teeth are absorbed by puckered lips and resting bitch face.

"Excuse me?"

"That's right, don't think I haven't heard you and your pool man doing it behind your fence. No man that hot is wasting his talents cleaning your filter. Not that one, anyway."

She seems genuinely shocked, as if someone has dropped a fifty-pound weight on her from ten stories up.

I've been saving that nugget for five years.

"I'm sorry, Sam, but I'm not sure what you're insinuating. Is everything alright?"

"Okay," I reply, "spare me the fake concern, Stacy. Your child,

Christopher? He and his buddies just ganged up on my kid, beat him senseless."

Stacy laughs. She could scream in my face, and it would not enrage me quite so much.

"Chris would never hurt your son. You must be mistaken."

"So, I take it you will talk to my son, and tell him the exact same thing you just told me? Because those boys have been harassing Nathan for months. *Months*. And now I have all I need to sue your ass. Even the pool guy won't go near you after that."

"Again, with this pool man business, Sam. Are you taking medications now? You seem very flustered."

"He came to service your pool in January, Stacy. You know, I thought it was weird I would see a pool service van when I was up to my fucking knees shoveling snow."

"He was servicing our heater. Satisfied?"

Oh, I bet he was.

"Deny it all you want, you witch. If your son or any of those boys lays a hand on mine again, I will litigate those plastic tits right off your chest."

I turn to walk away, have partially expunged my nauseating rage. I have left Stacy Thompson in eternal wonder whether her husband will look at his pool maintenance people a little more closely, and gradually piece it all together.

"Sam!" Stacy calls out as I reach the bottom of her lawn. I stop in my tracks, looking at my feet, afraid of what I might say if this conversation continues.

She closes her door and descends to the curb where I'm doing my best not to let clenched fists show.

"While I have you here- making a complete fool of yourself, no less—I thought you should be aware. The PTA is having a recall vote at the next meeting. Regarding your…*situation.*"

She's flexing her socialite muscles at me like some heavyweight boxing champion, scanning for a scared reaction, a weak spot, anything. Trying to figure me out by sending me running scared.

"While this does mean you may no longer have input or influence at Association meetings, you are welcome to have a say in your son's future by writing to your local school trustee."

Like all the other unaccepted, outcast parents.

"Are you threatening me, Stacy?"

Stacy laughs, swatting my shoulder with the back of her hand.

Don't do it, lady. I am one strong drink and a snarky comment away from watching your ever absent husband kick you to the curb.

"Oh, I never threaten, Samantha. You see, some of us care about the image our children have of us. Now, I realize Derek left you high and dry, and who could ever blame you, am I right? Not like you gave him reasons to stay," she says, enunciating each barb with a sly grin, staring me up and down, her eyes moving from my disheveled hair down to the grey sneakers I bought at Walmart without trying them on. There was no time.

"You don't intimidate me," I say. "You may appear to have this perfect little life all figured out in your head, Stacy, but I'll tell you what I see. Your man's a workaholic. Your kids are monsters. You have no idea how to be appreciated by anyone, really, so you spend your days playing petty little games with the ladies at those PTA meetings.

"You have to wear a half pound of makeup to hide all the ugliness inside you, because those other men? They would never give you a second of their time if you were still in a training bra. And your husband would still be doing everything in his power to get away from you."

Somewhere in her empty, little heart, I seem to strike a chord.

"Get off my lawn, Sam."

"With pleasure."

INSIDE MY HOUSE, YUKALAYLEE purrs and banters, greeting me by noticing the tail attached to his backside and proceeding to chase it. I close the door, pushing my back into it and sliding down its moral support until it runs out and I hit the floor, my tailbone all that stops me from turning into a Witch of Oz after water contact.

The tabby audaciously climbs in my lap, kneading my jeans and circling until claws come out and I push him away. He makes a second pass, and I snap, sending his fat legs bolting up the landing stairs. He growls loudly in disappointment but does not return. Muscles relax, and my head rolls back, eyes vacantly pointed at the ceiling.

This is all Derek's fault. Freddie said it would do more harm to my son and I than it ever would to him, and he was right.

I'm the fucking pariah of Weyburn Lane.

“Hello, Peter.”

On a screen in front of me, Viktor Quinn stares back, speaking from a video embedded inside the website. The beard is braided with black beads, his hair neatly combed.

In the background, I recognize his apartment- the flag of a raised fist he bought on the Internet a month after we met and bonded over a cigarette. He asked me for one, the first words I ever heard him say.

What was the second?

It only takes one moment.

Wasn’t this message meant for Anawi?

“I knew Syd would convince you to drive to Farhad Anawi’s house,” he says, “but I knew your conscience would get the better of you. If nothing else, Peter, I am a great judge of character.”

What the holy hell is going on?

“You are probably confused,” he continues in his prerecorded form, “I understand that. It took me a long time to come to grips with the way I feel. About myself. About my fellow people and those would threaten everything we stand for.

“But I promise you, Peter.” He removes the camera from its fixed position and brings it closer to his face. I can feel the heat of his breath as if he were here; smell the forty smokes he’s lit since waking up. “You are a part of history now. The things we do in the weeks and months to come will change the way our children and their children experience America.

“Come back to the warehouse tonight. Let me show you the power the Internet gives us, to spread a message of fury the world has never seen.” His voice is speaking on dual levels, of the Viktor I know and the devil that has taken hold of him.

It intertwines and multiples simultaneously, until I am left with no idea who I am speaking to.

“You may not feel this is the right path, Peter. But you are on it now, and the righteous road will protect its own.

“See you tonight.”

The screen goes black, and I want to scream until the windows of my car crack and glass falls into my lap from the sound pressure. Instead, I just stare, into the blackness of a ten inch screen that has just walked away with my soul, and never fired a single shot.

Samantha

I remember telling Catherine, when I was about nine, that I would never marry. When my mother, chain smoking in the confines of our small apartment in a faded pink bathrobe asked me why, it wasn't out of curiosity, but annoyance.

As a redhead youngster, most questions I asked aggravated her, my early feminist statements even more so.

Now, I think she really just wanted me to leave her alone so she could watch The Price is Right and have another glass of gin.

My father was often gone, although the timeline of their divorce was never clear, because we never saw them together. One day, he simply ceased to live there. Nothing remarkable changed for it.

"Why would you never marry, Sammy?" she asks me from the grave. In my mind, I appear an adult but sound like my childish self. "Don't want a man to take care of you?"

"Daddy doesn't take care of you, Mommy."

"That's because your father isn't a good man. But there are good men out there. Richer men. Men who should have been your father."

Oblivious to her bitterness, I lean in closer. She smells like week old booze and death. "Girls can take care of themselves, can't they Mommy?"

Catherine sighs but does not answer. It happened more than it didn't, that heartbreaking pause, and then nothing. No follow up of any kind, no comforting advice. Just a long scowl and an upward stream of blue smoke.

If only I'd seen what she was trying to tell me. I'm hard pressed to draw parallels between us, because life with her was hell and I was moved out the day I turned eighteen. Running away from my problems with my future husband, who in turn, ran away from me.

Her presence rivals silence in my dim-lit living room. The television is off, mounted beside the fireplace, but I haven't watched it in ages—too busy losing staring contests with white walls.

The glass of merlot perched in front of me is one of the few good

glassware pieces I have left. Derek bought it for our eleventh anniversary, the second-to-last we shared, and the last happy one.

I would spend our final one sinking in the knowledge he had fucked another woman; some bitch from the Islands. I think her name is Lorelai, but Derek said very little about her.

Nathan emerges from upstairs, his bruises turning a cruel shade of purple, even in low light. His eyes are red, as if he's been crying, but every reasonable effort has been made to hide the evidence.

"How's the face, kiddo?" I ask. "Come sit with me. Feels like I only ever see you in times of crisis."

"Can we watch TV?"

"If that's what it takes."

He obliges, sitting down beside me on the couch I've had since college. Much like me, it is beginning to betray its aging secrets. I hand him the remote, pulling him close to me, where his head finds my shoulder. He channel-surfs until we come to a nature show about praying mantises.

He always goes for weird.

"Did you know the female kills the male after sex?" he asks.

"I did know that. Did not need to be reminded, but I knew."

"Too bad you can't do that to *him,"* Nathan says. "Would be a fitting punishment."

"Well, need I remind you I am not currently sleeping with your father, and furthermore, this seems like a conversation I should not be having with my preteen child."

"Because there's so many other people on our side, right?"

"That," I say, already outsmarted, "is irrelevant. You kids these days. You grow up so fast. I didn't know what sex was until I was fifteen. Your father was the first man I ever kissed or let touch me. So, I don't know if I'm qualified to give serial killing praying mantises love advice."

He watches for a few minutes, as the close-up shots of the insect feeding on her mate fail to faze him, then speaks again.

"I met the new girl. Next door."

"Nadia?"

He nods. "I feel like we got along okay. Much better than the others treat me. Do you think she will stay?"

This conversation would have driven Catherine mad.

"I'm not sure," I reply, "Her family comes from a very different place."

“Syria.”

“Syria,” I say, “is a place rife with violence and suffering and there are a lot of people here who don’t understand that.”

“And you do?”

“Not on their level, no. I could never imagine what they went through to get here, and to be treated the way they are? It doesn’t compare, sweetie.”

Nathan doesn’t reply, much like his grandmother, but lies in my arms until I am convinced the sight of cannibal insects might just be the highlight of my week. I can feel his thoughts against my skin, the way they race, even if I can’t hear them.

When he kisses me goodnight with swollen lips and disappears into the black hole of his bedroom, I mute the television and pick up my cell phone off the table in front of me. The merlot is gone and so is any resolve of drawing out Nathan’s suffering.

I dial Derek, knowing he won’t pick up the phone. I hold the cold screen against my cheek, aware he’s probably six inches deep in his new flame, and I am the farthest thing from his idea of happiness.

I get his voicemail, as expected.

“Hi, this is Derek Wallace. Please leave your name and number after the tone, and I will return your call as soon as I can.”

It used to sound sweeter, less exhausted from his terrible choices.

“Derek, it’s Sam.” I keep my voice low to avoid rousing Nathan’s interest. “I’ll cut right to it. I don’t want to fight. You don’t want to see us, and don’t worry, the feeling is mutual. I will have Norm draw up new papers in the morning and deliver them over to your office.”

This is the worst one-sided conversation ever.

“Okay,” I say, clearing my throat. The nature channel has silently moved onto following orangutans in their natural habitat. The camera pans to a mother holding its offspring, and my voice catches. “See you, Derek.”

I end the call, and burst into tears, the waves of a hundred oceans washing over me.

Peter

I am out.

This little game Vic and Syd have concocted, in which we terrorize people and weaponize pigmentation, is not something I'm willing to partake in any longer.

At least, that's what I assure myself approaching the turn from the Boulevard onto Lord Street, my car groaning every step of the way.

Come on baby, you got this, I tell her, praying I won't need a tow truck in the next 24 hours. Or a casket.

The lights are on in the glass windows that run around the building beneath the roof's trim, but the air is quieter, and detrimentally so.

I am out, I remind myself, consequences be damned. If they can't accept that fact without putting a bullet in me, I'll be dead. If they can, I get to walk away.

Sixty-forty odds.

Inside the warehouse, the stage has been replaced with a set of long folding tables and hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of computer equipment. Several men of varying roughness, age and size talk amongst themselves in groups. A short, balding man in a checkered shirt with wiry spectacles and a bad limp floats between groups, asking questions in a hushed voice, getting his answer.

In a far corner, I recognize my friends Larry and Barney from the night before, playing a game of cards and looking bored and resentful.

In the middle of it all, naturally, is Vic. His back to me, calm still radiates from him, as he observes his operation for signs of weakness. The man in the checkered shirt limps over to him and whispers something in Vic's ear.

The man sees me, and we lock eyes over Vic's shoulder. He is gaunt and wiry, his lips pale and teeth behind them stunted and stained. He squints, piercing my whole existence with his stare. He talks fast but too low for me to hear. I can only tell when his expression changes that he's alerted his boss to my intrusion.

Vic turns to face me. Back in his suit, he has become a different person from the one that had me deliver drugs only yesterday afternoon.

"Peter!" he exclaims, approaching me with a huge grin on his face. He enthusiastically shakes my hand. "So glad you made it."

He wraps his arm around my shoulder and guides me toward the tables and his new friends. Larry and I share a gaze. He nods like we've known each other for years. Barney and I share a similar moment.

"Gentlemen," Vic says to the others, "I'd like you to meet a friend of mine. This is Peter York, and he will be working with us indefinitely."

Don't speak for me yet, Viktor Quinn.

"My friends," he says, "the future is bright. For years, we have heard about recessions being the reasons we can't progress. Failed bipartisanship is the logic behind all the moral larceny we endure, apparently. We know what it really is, don't we?" He pauses but knows we won't steal the revelation from him.

Except for Larry, who does.

"Women!" he guffaws, looking at Barney who vigorously shakes his head in return, trying to escape immediate association with the joke.

Vic's cheery disposition vanishes. All eyes are on Larry, the poor bastard with a big mouth, finally realizing what poor timing the comedic gods gave him.

"The fuck did you say, Ronald?"

I liked my name for him better.

"Uh, nothing, boss."

Vic reaches for the inside of his blazer and unholsters a silver pistol. He waves it in the air as he speaks.

"Did you come from a woman, Ronald? Do you not have a mother?"

"Sure do, boss."

"And sisters? Do you have them? Daughter too, if I recall correctly?"

"All of the above, boss," Larry replies.

"What about you, Andre?" Vic asks Barney. Come to think of it, he does look like an Andre. "Got kids?"

"No, sir," Barney concedes, "Live with my old lady. She's old, and well, I don't get out a lot."

“Well,” Vic says, “then I guess that decides it.” He raises his pistol and fires three rounds into Barney. One in the stomach, one in the chest, a final one in the head.

The sounds happen in quick succession. No one blinks but me, eardrums ringing. Larry, instead, screams as Barney convulses against the bullets buried in his organs, but the man dies too quick to understand. His full weight collapses to the floor where the rest of him crumples like a paper ball.

“Now,” Vic tells a sobbing Larry, “I hope that will teach you to respect women more, Ronald. Set a good example for your children going forward, or Andre here died for fuck all. Now, get this piece of shit out of here. And someone call his mother. Send her flowers, too. Poor woman has nobody left.”

My eyes can’t tear themselves from Barney’s broken form, bleeding out on the floor of a Lord Street warehouse. Television always made shootings seem so much cleaner.

“You okay?” Vic asks me. “Peter, you look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I am rage but have no more strength than a whisper.

“You killed him.”

He shares a look with his colleagues, who give us the room, shuffling out the red metal door in single file.

Larry drags Barney’s corpse across the floor, leaving a trail of blood in his wake. The dude is adrenaline at the moment, grunting and heaving to get as far away from here as possible, maybe to run home to his girl and hold onto her for dear life.

When the door closes behind him, Vic and I are alone. He stands with hands in his suit’s pockets, as I try to avoid meeting his dead eyes.

“I can’t do this, Viktor,” I say. The image of Barney’s life leaving him, followed by Vic holding the gun at eye level (*pop, pop, pop)* play in my head on an infinite loop. “This is not my fight.”

Vic smiles, as if he has both heard me and the same argument from people all his life. It all rolls off him.

“I want to show you something, Peter.” He drifts to the farthest table, where a black laptop is hooked up to a projector. “Get the lights, would you? Back wall.”

I oblige him, wishing I had traded places with Larry. Burying an overweight bodyguard in the middle of fucking nowhere seems much more bearable than this.

The projector whirs to life, lighting up a square block of light on the darkened wall. A map of the United States, devoid of state lines, drenches our faces in blue glare.

"The Internet is an amazing thing. To think that sixty years ago, the fastest way to relay information across great distances was Morse code. It took *minutes* to transmit a full sentence to the other side of the planet. Telephones existed, sure, but they weren't what they are now.

"That this smorgasbord of ideas and free speech exists is an act of God, Peter. A wonder of science. That it has passed to us peasants is the seed of revolution.

"Jihad embraced it. Russia embraced it. Meanwhile, our own government seeks to curtail it at every turn. But that's because every revolution requires a spark."

"So, if I'm reading this right, you're going to kill people?"

Viktor laughs. "Nothing so extreme. If heads roll, it will only be because the greater good compels it. We act merely as an intermediary, Peter."

"I still don't understand, then."

"Put it this way. In 1955, if someone had killed your whole family, this guy's family and maybe some other dude's clan- enough to force people to care about a serial killer, that is- and the government did, I don't know, fuck all about it? That seems to be the standard reaction they have to anything, so why not?

"Let's say...this was happening everywhere, in little towns across our great nation. Just for the sake of argument, how long do you think it would take to mobilize nationwide in 1955?"

I shrug. "Days?"

"Fucking weeks, Pete. Weeks. Communication was still in the Stone Age. It's a wonder anything got done at all, unless you were Uncle Sam himself."

"Now you're the one speaking Morse Code, Vic. Can we get to whatever fucking point you have?"

Vic is pacing back and forth now. His hands have grand gestures for every grandiose statement, a unique mask to terrify me for every ounce of conviction he carries.

"We live in an age where I can tell the Internet, 'Hey, fuckwads. These poor saps are taking your livelihood, eating up your hard-earned tax dollars and living on your food stamps. Let's get together and show this country we don't tolerate it!' How long do you think

it would take to get angry people into the streets?"

Viktor answers his own question.

"Seconds. Minutes. A fucking hour at most."

"So, we're protesting, then?" I ask, trying not to look at the trail of blood by the door.

"I prefer 'asserting our position', personally," Vic replies, "People are weak. They spend so much time worrying about the consequences of acting, they forget to consider the ones where they don't act in their own best interest. And *that* is the definition of fallacy, Peter. There are people who would let the rapists and murderers into your house, because they think these people can be saved."

"You know they're not all killers and rapists," I tell him.

"Guilt by association, Pete."

"Vic, that would be like saying the Westboro United Church speaks for all Christians. I mean," I say, wishing my internal dialogue was less unhinged by witnessing murder. "Protest all you want, but you're thirty-two. I'm twenty-eight. We've both lived in this country long enough to *know* the government doesn't serve us."

"See," Vic says, continuing to pace back and forth between the grey folding tables, "this is where I know you've misunderstood. We're not pussy-footing outside an abortion clinic, Peter. We are manufacturing change."

There's that phrase again.

"Here's what I don't get. What I'm struggling so hard to reconcile, Vic," I say, "What in the fucking world are you getting out of this shit? You look like an Irishman trying to be made in the mob. You have more military-grade equipment here than my crazy cousin Kirk has guns in Utah, man. I don't see you as a politician anytime soon. So, what the hell are you getting out of this?"

Viktor stops pacing, looking around his feet and then back at me. "Do you know why Adolf Hitler was so...accepted, Peter? We glorify him as some sort of monster, but he really was a simple man. He spoke to people like you and I, the feudal servants of society who had lost everything to dynasty. They started a war; people like us waged it on their behalf. And for that, they lost everything they had.

"National identity. Their money. Standard of living. Hitler fucking took that, that fire, and carved their anger into an instrument of vengeance."

He also murdered six million people for their ethnicity. At least, I hope Viktor can acknowledge that.

"You ask me what I want, Peter?" Vic says, lighting a cigarette from the breast pocket of his stone-colored suit. "I am no fucking prophet. But surely, this is not what our Founding Fathers had in mind for us. To be overrun with the vermin, see our 'Promised Land" infected? America was supposed to be our gateway of opportunity, wasn't it? A key to prosperity. Instead, it's become a cesspool of shit-skinned equality."

He resumes pacing. Inhaling. Exhaling, words spewed from his mouth like smoke.

"My father, his name was Harry. He was a good man, once. But the drink got into him, and he became something else entirely. A shroud of himself. Black, like the darkest night, and yet, with just enough light left to want to save him."

Exhale, waxing monoxide.

"That man took every sense of purpose from me, except making sure he didn't kill my mother. And when he died, ironically, I felt more lost than ever. In and out of prison, stealing anything that wasn't nailed down.

"My point is, Peter. I finally have a purpose. I speak the words that so many want to say themselves, but for whatever reason, haven't. Because the other side? *They* want us all to have thin skin like them and bow before these third world peasants. You call them liberals. I call them insects; a swarm of nuisance that is ruining this beautiful nation.

"We are Americans," he says. "When our home is threatened, it is upon us to protect it. And seeing how no one else in this God-forsaken country seems to be willing to lead the charge, I will. You and Syd are my lieutenants, and the people will be our army.

"Against that," he smiles, "and the Internet in our hands, what chance does a government stand?"

Nathan

THE COMPUTER SCREEN in front of the school receptionist is turned away from me, but in her glasses, a game of Solitaire rages on, as I watch her placing cards in the reflection of her horn-rimmed bifocals.

I hope it goes better for her than it did for Danielle Lewis when Miss Swanson caught her playing Minesweeper during a typing test.

My face feels like a balloon. The beating Chris and Chester gave me still rings in my swollen ear, makes my lips throb, and reignites hot pain between my ribs just thinking about it.

I still don't understand how to play Minesweeper.

The lady at the desk wears a perfume that stings my eyes and nose, and I roll my head from side to side trying to escape its overwhelming assault on my senses. Grandma always wore stuff like that. It's no wonder we rarely hugged.

Boredom sets in, so I look at the different plaques and posters on the wall from the imprisonment of my chair.

Teacher of the Month. Mr. Young won it in May.

We have school spirit! Some of us more than others.

The phone at reception rings twice. That means it's him; my arch-nemesis. We're on something of a first-name basis, although I haven't figured out his office extension.

The secretary won't tell me.

"Yes, Mr. Kirkson. I will send him in right away." She hangs up the phone, and I can see the excess skin on her arms droop with the handset as she replaces it in the cradle. "Mr. Kirkson will see you, Nathan. Second door on the left."

"I know where it is. Only here every other day," I tell her, taking as long as possible to vacate the chair. My feet begin dragging toward the narrow corridor of offices to my left.

"Maybe," the secretary says, "if you weren't in trouble all the time, you wouldn't be here, Nathan."

Neither would I had that guy not saved me.

"He should have let them kill me," I mutter.

"What was that?" she asks.

"Nothing."

MARV KIRKSON IS A POOR excuse for a principal, with his slouched shoulders and lame ties. He tries to play the tough guy when you know the sound of gunfire would send him running, what with all the in-house psychopaths these days.

"Nathan!" he groans, "Have a seat, young man."

I obey, taking the chair closest to me. It is nowhere near as comfortable as his looks. Brushing hair out of my face, we engage in our customary exchange of glares, before he looks down at the papers in his hand.

"Would you care to explain what *this* is?" he says, holding up in pieces and looking at the bloody mess of typed words underneath.

"It's an essay, Mr. Kirkson."

He sighs, placing it back on the desk. "And can you tell me what the subject of the essay was supposed to be, Nathan?"

I can feel his eyes analyzing the bruises on my face; the same ones he stopped me in the hallway for earlier and asked if everything was okay.

"Whether the Founding Fathers were wrong to own slaves."

"And were they wrong?" he asks.

"No. I think they were well within their rights."

"And why is that?"

I shrug, twirling a strand of hair around my finger. "All in the essay, Mr. Kirkson. I can give you the Coles' Notes version of it."

"Please do."

"Everyone else owned slaves."

"And?"

"That's it."

He sighs, tired of seeing me as I am him. His eyes search the floor underneath the wood desk for answers, but none speak to him.

"Son, is everything alright at home?"

"Sure."

"I mean, you're coming to class like you just came out of a UFC match. You're spewing smart-Alec remarks in an assignment that Miss Swanson told me herself, was to understand *why* the Founding Fathers were wrong to own slaves! Not to...defend it!"

I could easily throw Chris and his little gang under the bus right now. Mom would want me to, but she's not been herself for a long time now. I don't know if we would do things the same.

“I recall your parents are no longer together, is that right?” he asks. “We just want to make sure nothing.... unscrupulous is happening at home.”

“Unscrupulous?”

“It means a situation that is unfair to you.”

I feel the toe of Chester’s sneaker kicking me. My face scrunches up, something that often happens when I’m in an unfavorable situation.

“Has your mother been hitting you, Nate?”

The question catches me off guard. Mom would never. She told me she had to once, when I refused sleep and started shrieking instead.

The only way to avoid a visit from the cops was to backhand me across the face.

No wonder I have trust issues.

“No, Mr. Kirkson. I just.... fell off a play structure.”

“What about the boys I see taunting you in the yard. Anything to do with them?”

“No, Mr. Kirkson. I just fell off a play structure, I said.”

He sighs, same way all my teachers do at my existence.

“Very well,” he says, “You may go.” I stand to leave when he stops me. “I sincerely hope we will see less of each other in this setting going forward, Nathan.”

Believe me, Mr. Kirkson.

So do I.

THE BELL ENDING THE day’s final recess rings, and I merge into the traffic of other kids, a stranger among them.

I’ve known most of them for over half my life.

There’s Suzy Miller, whose hair has gone from blonde pigtails since kindergarten to a mushroom cut dyed purple and back in the span of a couple years. There’s Ricardo Bennington, who was a loser until last year when a sixth-grader gave him head in the boy’s bathroom. Now he’s a superstar.

Hannah Locklear, third grade crush. She hates my guts.

Jacob Jones, the disabled boy all the meaner kids call Helmet. I still call him Jacob because I have no friends to sit with and making fun of him would not net me one iota of respect from them, but I have an idea that might.

Nadia, out of her element as ever, sees me across the main hall and joins me. She doesn't wear the scarf anymore. A backpack hangs loosely off her shoulders, and she hugs a thick textbook.

"I wish to break free of this," she said when we met outside our houses. "Someday, I wish not to be controlled by stupid, petty men and their designs."

I told her she would.

Someday.

Part 2

Monsters

Peter

It only takes one moment, staking out Lafayette Square in a blue Honda on the verge of slow mechanical death, to realize this is probably not what your parents had in mind for you.

My mother, for all her faults, wanted the best for us. What that "best" was comprised of depended on both her blood alcohol level and our electrocardiogram-like levels of sass. In the old days, she smoked and lectured, punished and drank, then lectured us some more. She left the more physical repercussions to our father, who beat me so badly once for shoplifting, I didn't walk straight for two weeks.

After the affair, neither of our parents laid a hand on us again.

Syd Mayhew, staring through binoculars in my passenger seat, canvassing the tree line with unflinching resolve, scans for any sign of trouble. Between her feet are dual duffel bags, the contents of which I was not told.

"All clear?" I ask, lighting a cigarette.

"Can you not?" she snaps, without moving her eyes away from the thick binoculars in her hand which easily dwarf her facial features.

"What?" I ask. "I see you smoke at least a pack a day, Syd."

"Yeah, but not in a fucking hotbox with the windows shut. Pitch the butt, Pete."

"Fuck you," I reply, taking a long drag and exhaling slowly. "I never wanted to be a part of this. And this is my car, by the way. You don't get to tell me the rules while we're inside of it."

"So, don't touch the radio, then? Are you really one of those people?"

"I don't answer to you."

"You're right," she says, lowering the viewfinder, "This fucking park was such a waste of money. Could have spent it on something useful."

"Such as?" I ask, with the sweet taste of death still in my mouth.

"Veterans. Homeless people. Kids whose families can't afford a goddamned lunch to take to school, because a certain state

governor recently took out the in-house lunch program and used those funds to build a fucking monument to himself. Those kinds of things."

"Were you the kid without a lunch, Syd?"

"Only if my momma was on the pipe that week, I was. Which was usually the case."

"I'm sorry," I say, but she does not acknowledge it or give any reference to what she's waiting for. Peace, perhaps. Mayhem. A change of seasons. *You are the company you keep*, a voice from the past chimes. My mother's. As I slide further down the driver's seat, sighing at my watch, puffing on the ends of a bittersweet poison, I finally see the lessons in her words.

"The rally is starting soon," Syd muses, finally lowering the binoculars and casting a glare in my direction. "We best get our game faces on, Pete."

"How will we know when it starts? Someone going to announce it for us?"

"Nothing so flashy," she replies, "but you won't miss it. Ronald and the others should be here, soon. Once they arrive, we will divert from the main rally. Vic has something else in mind for us."

"And here I thought I'd be ripping people's tickets and telling them to follow the yellow brick road."

"What's up your ass today, Peter? I'm on the rag and you're a bigger bitch than I am. Give me one of those," she gestures to the pack of cigarettes I bought an hour ago. Four are already gone.

She lights the smoke, rolling down the manually-controlled window to exhale. The turnstile creaks as she pumps it clockwise.

"Jesus Christ, it's two fucking thousand eighteen, and you can't get a car with power windows?" She flicks the snaking ashes off the end of her cigarette, and the nausea I narrowly escaped during my own hits me, full stop. "You're a good looking guy, Peter. Bit short for my taste, but you might have a girlfriend if you weren't living and shitting out of a time capsule."

"I will take that as a compliment," I reply. "Backhanded as it may be."

In the distance, beads of light like fireflies in the darkness bob and draw closer. It catches my vacant gaze like bared threads on a nail, pulling me back from boredom's danger zone.

I elbow Syd, finishing off the cigarette between her long fingers.

"What the hell?" she says.

“Look.”

Her eyes follow my line of sight, and she’s seen it. The row of orange blobs is accompanied by the growing applause of marching feet, and faint chanting. Syd’s cheeks lift in a rare smile, as if Viktor has sent all his love in a bouquet of shadows holding torches.

What the fuck am I doing here?

You are the company you keep.

A fist raps on my window, tearing me in yet another direction, but this time, almost out of my skin.

Jason, the lanky, black kid who loiters with his mute friend outside Syd’s place of employment. Robert is here, too, dressed in a trench coat that’s too small for the shoulders and constricts his fat arms.

“Christ,” Syd says, rolling her eyes. “Not these dimwits.” Her hands work to unzip the duffel bag closest to her, and she tells me to roll down my window.

“Pete!” Jason says as fresh breeze masks my cheeks. The smell of marijuana is permanent on his breath, the stench of drug money dragging down his baggy jeans. “Pete, man, shit is hitting the fan, brother. Oh hey, girl,” he says to Syd. She offers a sneer in response, still rooting around in the bulging bag at her feet.

“What’s going on?” I ask him.

“What’s going on, Pete, is we need to bounce! There’s a whole posse of them supremacists headed this way. They got torches and pitchforks and shit! You saw it too, didn’t you Robbie?”

Robert nods in vehement agreement.

“It’s probably a peaceful protest, don’t worry.” I try to say it in the calmest voice I have, which is not calm at all. “Maybe they’re just staking out a more visible location than Lord Street. Gets hard to be heard back there.”

“This ain’t the time for sarcasm, dawg! Heard one of them yelling they were gonna be shooting up every damn person of color they saw. Just thank our stars they didn’t catch us yet.”

“In that case, I’d get out of here, Jay. You and him, just blow town for a couple days.”

Syd seems to find what she’s looking for in the depths of her duffel, but I just want to make sure I’m not associated with these two when the mobs show up. I’m in no mood to be the audience to a public lynching.

“Nah, Pete, we all have to get out of here! You don’t

understand."

Beside me, I hear an unmistakable click; cold as a January day to the little hairs on my arm, as a thousand scenarios flash through my mind with the turning of my head. Every single goddamned one but the one playing out.

"You talk too much," Syd says.

A lone bullet zips across the stratosphere of my entire existence, barely given time enough to register the gun's target is not me. The sound pierces my hearing as the point blank gunshot shatters Jason's balance, along with his breastplate. Lead buries itself in his mass, violently propelling the thin boy to the ground, where he stops, meeting his immovable object.

I scream, clutching my ear, as if to shield it from the explosive decibels pulling my hearing in opposite directions. Robert also screams, the only time I've heard him make a sound. Too bad I feel underwater for the duration, but also a blessing as Syd follows up with a bullet to his head.

The second shot is fainter than the first, but no less brutal. Thinking my palms have any kind of soundproofing effect, I clasp both sides of my head.

The fat boy collapses downward in a straight descent like a planned demolition.

"Drive!" Syd demands.

The chanting grows closer. The lights emanate brighter, swallowing the darkness in their nihilistic glow. My feet are heavier on the pedal, heartbeat digging into my stomach like a tunneling mole.

I am so tired of cold-blooded murder.

"Drive, Peter! Get us the fuck out of here!"

The front wheels screech against the change from park to drive, and we speed away from the curb. I can't see Jason and Robert's bodies, but their final expressions lay on the ground of my mind, bleeding outward.

"That should keep some cops busy for a while," she says, gently laying the silver handgun across the opening to the duffel bag, then zipping it closed.

Check all the mirrors. Side. Rear. Blindspot. Rinse and repeat.

"Was that really fucking necessary?" I spit. The world moves around me like a kaleidoscope, stretches of serrated blue, red and the stars between them.

“Oh, Peter,” she grins, her manic blonde hair blowing in the wind of her open window. “You don’t understand how necessary some things are. But you will. Viktor might tolerate you, see you as some sort of cynical ally, but I think you’re a fucking liability!”

“Gonna shoot me, too?” I ask her.

She leans into my ear, still pulsing from its apocalyptic proximity to the Grim Reaper. Her warm breath is a dagger against the muffled mess that sounds have become, as I drive against disorientation and total fucking darkness.

Her whispers are hollow point, but their outlines are clear.

I am the master; you are the slave.

And she’s right. I may end up doing the deed for her when all is said and done.

Samantha

The first time I used the Internet, I was in high school. I did not get an email address until I was twenty-three. All the photos I have are stashed away in dark bookcases, ominous flowers streaking across hardcover albums next to my discarded vinyl collection.

Divorce can ruin so many things that once made you happy.

My son, on the other hand, can manipulate the Internet to his will, sifting through social media pages, forums, you-name-it. He can find people across space and time, names I never thought or cared to hear again. Suddenly, you want to know if that person's life is as terrible as yours, reading between the happy photos and faux perfection to determine the real story, if there exists one to gloat in at all.

Unfaithful men seem to be a recurring problem in my life. Knowing Penny Jones is living on a yacht somewhere, sipping margaritas does not tell a story I want to hear.

Yukalaylee greets me, circling underfoot as I struggle to fit the gaggle of plastic shopping bags around my forearms through the doorway. Inside them are faint hopes of dinner with Nathan, a lost tradition of late. His brown shoes, beaten and frayed, are conspicuously absent from the landing.

He had better not be wearing them in the house.

"Nate?" I call up the stairs. "Nathan?"

No hail of virtual gunfire. Even when he's not glued to the flatscreen I bought him for his birthday, he's a loud sulker.

Yukalaylee squawks.

"Great," I mutter aloud. "Dinner with the damn cat again."

The answering machine is flashing. The food gets forgotten, left on the kitchen floor in its plastic constraints. Yuke investigates the pile for any signs of feline-related grub. Unsatisfied with the results, he wanders away, grumbling to himself.

Where has this kid gone?

I ascend to the top floor of my condo, which is a single hallway with four doors, one on each end and two on the wall. Nathan and I occupy the ends, both closed. The bathroom and guest room are

open, but I haven't been in the master since Derek left. Too many ghosts.

"Nathan?" I ask, gently knocking.

My son's bedroom reflects him. The windows are obscured by crude garbage bags, torn at the seams and held around the trim by white masking tape. A single bed and desk occupy adjacent walls, his forty-inch flat screen television mounted on the one beside the door.

Dirty socks and clothes are dumped at various spots around the room, which Yuke sniffs as he trails behind me. Deciding he wants no part of this expedition, the cat wanders into the hallway and plops himself outside the bathroom door with a half-hearted yawn.

It wasn't always like this; I remind myself searching the surface of Nathan's desk. When he was younger, we spent hours in here. I knew every book in his bookshelf, and over the years, every word within them after reading the same ones a million times.

I couldn't tell you what he reads these days.

Sifting through the assortment of papers on his desk, I unearth treasures along the way—a stashed report card and myriad, talented drawings. Most of them consist of aliens of some kind.

One is an amalgam of jellyfish and celery root, its black and white tentacles stretching their nightmarish influence outward and down.

A shroud.

I open the laptop his father gave him the Christmas after leaving us. It was a parting gift from a heartless bastard, but I need to make sure he's safe.

Any guilt about snooping through his things disappears with the screen he left open, set to a social media feed.

Lafayette Square. 8 PM.

The time has come, brothers and sisters, the event description reads, *to reclaim your home! It will take numbers, and it will require sacrifice, but the founding class will rule this country once again!*

If you stand with us, meet us at 8 p.m. on Monday night by Lafayette Square. Together, we can rewrite history!

Why would Nathan be looking at a white supremacy event? There's not a racist bone in his little body. Right? Kid owns half a dozen video games chock full of racial lingo and f-bombs and the like, but I've never heard him use language like that.

Those boys.

Chester and Chris and the rest of that little motley crew have been tormenting him for months. I read the event page, over and over, until my eyes burn. One final time because I want to make sure I'm not asleep, which I've been.

He's trying to win their acceptance.

Downstairs, the doorbell chimes. Yukalaylee, assuming some signal of imminent feeding, shakes the cheap, prefab walls of my condo with his thick thighs on the way downstairs. I follow him, afraid it's the cops, come to tell me Nathan is hurt, or worse. Even more terrified it's my soon to be ex-husband, come to make amends.

A thin man with olive skin and matching eyes occupies my doorstep. His collared shirt is distracting, the left side turned up slightly more than the right, from his hollow stare. A perpetual frown and broken teeth mar his attempt at an awkward smile.

"Hello," he says in a belabored accent I don't immediately place but is vaguely Middle Eastern. "My, uh, name is Farhad. I live next door?"

"You people really need to stop showing up on my doorstep," I say. "I'm sorry, that came out wrong. I just realized my son snuck out of the house; my sister has left six voicemails on my cell phone because she's on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I haven't eaten since noon, and my cat is driving me nuts. So please, *please* understand, Farhad. I just don't have time to feel like an idiot, okay? I'm sure you, just like your family, are wonderful people, but you know? Every time I cross paths with the guy in the chair, or your daughter—"

"Niece," he corrects me. The accent is thick, the words behind them meek. "Nadia is my niece."

"Right," I reply, hoping for a safe to fall out of the sky like those old cartoons, breaking every bone in my clenching body. "Well, it seems we have, uh, a cultural barrier, and I am just... *trying* to not put my foot in my mouth every time I talk with a member of your family. I just really don't think today is going to be one of those days I can control it."

I am unceremoniously interrupted by the vibrating of my cell phone. Hoping for Nathan, apprehensive it's Stephanie leaving yet another indiscernible tangent, I pull the outdated flip screen device from my jeans' pocket.

Freddie.

"Would you hold on a second?" I ask Farhad.

Without allowing him to respond, I answer the call.

"Have you seen the fuckin' news?"

"Not even a hello?" I ask.

"It's those supremacists, Sam. They're storming Lafayette. I can see torches from my chip wagon."

"Wait, Freddie, slow down. What do you mean, storming?"

"Oh, the exact bullshit you would expect. Smashing windows around the Strip. Megaphones. Chanting. Lock your doors, dear."

"Excuse me, miss," Farhad says. "If this is about the rally—"

"Please give me a second!" I snap at my visitor.

"I would not be so rude," he continues, expression resolved, even if his words are not, "but I believe your son and my niece are in attendance."

"Sam?" Freddie says in my ear, but he is not heard, despite repeating my name and asking if I heard him anyway.

All I can do is stare into Farhad's chiseled chin and intense eyes and permanent tan. All I hear is the confirmation he offers me; not in the form of a text message or a phone call or a fucking social media event on Facebook, but a living, breathing stranger.

"Freddie," I say into the receiver. "I need your help."

"What we doing?" Freddie asks. "Because I'm considering pushing that fucking fryer up against my door and waiting this thing out."

"We're going to the Square," I tell Freddie.

Farhad nods his approval, but the encouragement of men is something I'm learning is overvalued. I nod back at him, but less because I agree with any plan of his, than I'm just capitulating to the rocking of my neck, trying to calm the nausea banging against my stomach lining.

For all the things Nathan shares with the Internet, he does not share them with his mother. He can tell random people on forums and chat boards and comment sections his true feelings, but never me.

Peter

I met Syd Mayhew just minutes after Viktor Quinn and I exchanged our first words, outside the convenience store where she worked. He was waiting on a "customer". The guy showed up as Syd exited the store, turning her key in the lock which wouldn't prevent anyone with a crowbar and the right dose of motivation from robbing her boss blind.

This is Syd, Vic told me.

A very special girl.

Don't fucking speak for me, Viktor.

Don't mind her, she's very passionate with words.

I said hello and that scowl, the one I know now like an old friend with severe emotional issues, adorned her lips.

Who the fuck is this person, Vic? You just make friends with everybody, don't you?

Sydney wears that same scowl now, watching Larry and his brethren smash a maternity store window. A derelict sedan across the single lane road, once some mundane grey, has charred and blackened but for the straggling drops of flame dancing across its hood. Glass is everywhere. The street is dead. Sirens eviscerate the distant calm, trying to contain the riot less than a mile from where we are.

Larry's new partner Walter, the thin man with wiry glasses who whispered into Viktor's ear with such importance, is to blame for the car. He is shorter than both Syd and I, and deathly quiet until the time to set something ablaze presents itself. At that point, his eyes light up like his next target, a wry grin dripping off his concave cheeks.

"No more fires!" Syd commands as he eyes another target. "Motherfucker is gonna get us all killed."

"Now I know what my mom said about picking your friends," I tell her.

"Shut the fuck up, Pete. Not like you've done a single thing but mope and complain tonight. Why don't you take this bat?" she says, offering the aluminum handle of her choice weapon.

“You killed two men, maybe?”

Syd smirks. “Every war has its casualties, Peter. Go on.” She thrusts the handle closer to my chest.

“No thanks.”

“*Walter!,”* she exclaims. “Don’t you go near that! Get away from the post office!” She shakes her head, withdrawing the bat I thought was almost going to impale me as she yelled at him, and lowers her voice. “One thing if he breaks a window, I’m not trying to burn the whole town to the ground.”

“Just had to bring the firestarter,” I muse.

Larry and his two friends continue strolling along the Strip, hurling their tools into doors and windows and signs. As Walter slinks around the perimeter, Syd’s wary eye on him, the other two smash, grab and bend anything in arm’s reach to soundtracks of shattered peace.

“I don’t know what Vic sees in you,” Syd tells me, lighting another of my smokes from the pack she commandeered. “I always thought you looked like a rat. I’m surprised you haven’t gone to the cops, already.”

“Would that really change anything?”

She pulls on the smoke. The burning end lights up like a Christmas bulb. Exhale accompanies a hoarse cough which she buries in the naked crook of her arm.

“No,” she replies through breaths she can’t quite catch. “Except your odds of survival, maybe.”

“You always were a pain in the ass, Syd.”

“Aw, I’m flattered,” she says, sounding anything but.

“Don’t be. Once you and Vic are done with your little operation, I’m splitting town.”

“It won’t matter, Peter.”

“What does that mean?”

The scowl and smirk are interchangeable, like a light flicked on and off so often, Sydney’s expressions could induce seizures. Corners on her mouth rise and fall like waves.

“It means that once America sees what we’ve accomplished tonight, it will be everywhere. People are sick of unfair advantage being given to niggers and towelheads. Nobody is going to want to sit the fuck down and take it up the ass anymore.”

“Never took you for an anal girl.”

“Fuck you, Peter.”

“Again,” I say. “No, thanks.”

“I can’t wait until you have to live with what we’ve done in that little conscience of yours. It’s unfortunate, because you could grow the fuck up and see this for what it is instead of playing the victim. Die, knowing you’ve made an actual difference for your children, who just grow up to despise their parents anyway.

“You’ll toss and turn, get counselling. I don’t know, maybe turn to the bottle here and there? Tell yourself you didn’t have the power to save them. That the anger, it was too strong in the people around you.

“Point is, Peter?” she says, with a thousand windows breaking around her words, and landing on the sidewalk in an obstacle course of my frayed emotions. “It won’t matter where you go after tonight. Because this revolution will follow you- on TV, on the Internet, in your fucking dreams. Everywhere. You will spend the rest of your natural life full of regret. And for what? People who would have taken everything from you.”

“I’m starting to believe you and Vic are about to take a lot more than some immigrants ever could.”

“Well,” she scoffs, “that’s your fucking loss, Pete. Maybe you’ll feel differently when—hold on a second.”

Syd crosses the ruined road of toppled stop signs and crunching glass under laced boots to a gaping chasm where Walter stands, fondling a grenade.

Beyond the jagged crop circle of a former window, shelves of liquor stare back at him, goading.

Sydney lowers the bat before hoisting it back and slamming into Walter’s rib. The wiry man buckles, his thin glasses falling to the ground in front of him.

“I said *no more* of this shit!” she exclaims, whipping it back up and then down, connecting with Walter’s kidney. I cringe as the nerves in my own back empathize with him, raising both hands above his head, trembling, begging no more.

Syd relents and returns to me.

“Get the duffel from your car,” she says, no amusement park rides left in her tone. “We’re moving on.”

I gesture to Walter, still in a fetal position across the street. “What about him?”

She looks back, replacing the aluminum bat over her shoulder. “Fuck him. Viktor will hang out with just anybody, Christ. Man

loves his liabilities."

Who the fuck is this person, Viktor?

Samantha

I don't know how this all went to hell.

I was eight weeks pregnant when Derek proposed to me, outside the high school we had both avoided, skipped and barely graduated. He had long hair back then, and scruff he saw as the beginnings of a beard. I saw it as a travesty, but it would be five years before he gave up trying.

I would have that version of him back, but the boy became a man, and clean-shaven Derek turned out to be another mid-level, corporate asshole, working his way up a ladder that had nothing but rungs of fucking degeneracy.

Catherine never liked him, either. The woman was wiser than I give her credit for. She obliged us, as long-suffering matriarchs tend to do, but there was a snark to it, and outright disapproval would almost certainly have been kinder.

"You look lost," Freddie says from the passenger seat, but the night is swirling outside my window, caught seemingly unaware by the urgency that has overtaken me.

"I'm just thinking about Nathan," I admit, letting each set of yellow lines be swallowed underneath my Jeep's chassis. I know better than to let panic rush in, but it can have me.

"Nathan's fine, Sam. Hell, I remember being caught up in a protest during the eighties. Your son is smart."

"You? In a protest?" I scoff at the image that pops into my brain, of a young Freddie with an afro and effortless goatee while Derek was trying to match his whiskers. "Doesn't seem likely."

"Doesn't it?" he chuckles, slouched where I know his back pains him. "I didn't mean to be where I was. Just the wrong place, wrong time. That's why I hear about my son Jason; he's dealing pot, cracking safes. Who knows? He used to be such a happy kid. Then Esmeralda and I done and fucked the boy up."

"You can't blame yourself for that, Freddie,"

"I put him in a bad way. Now I've got six teeth left and my gums hurt so bad I can't eat a damn steak properly, let alone afford one. Boy will have no respect for me, but I've got to do something, Sam."

I want to afford Freddie his crisis, but like Nathan's cell, my brain is going right to voicemail.

"I can tell you've given this a lot of thought," I say, "but maybe this is bigger than you or Esmeralda. Maybe it will take a hard lesson for him, right?"

He stares out the window opposite the one that has grabbed my constant attention, scanning for any sign of a distraught ten year old boy, trying not to entertain the thought.

Sirens wail, closer and closer, rushing towards us as we bolt towards them.

The closer we get, the more glass lines the streets. At first, the shops are few and the pricks of a few shards are nothing but a crunching nuisance to the Jeep's tires. Then, a sea of it blocks our path, lined up like a thousand miniature road spikes to stop us from progressing.

I let the car roll to a complete stop, pushing the stick up to park. As I unbuckle myself, Freddie asks what the hell I'm doing.

"What does it look like?"

"Looks to me like you're about to do something crazy. Like waltzing into the middle of that racket."

"I'm going to find my kid, Freddie." The driver's door swings open at my own behest, my limbs taking it upon themselves when my old friend grabs me by the one closest to him.

"Think about this, Sam. What good can come of it?" His dark, callused hands, heavy with the burns of years around fryers and oil, relax their grip on my arm.

"You know, Freddie?" I say, my feet almost touching the road, legs pulsing like they're ready to run for miles. "I've thought like that for far too long. And, um, I think you have, too.

"I don't know where it all went to hell, and the truth is, I don't care much anymore. Last year, I was another pretty, fucking...*vapid* housewife!" The words feel molten off my tongue, like they are erupting after being held in so long. "I didn't have to worry about my son growing up to hate me, or whether or not I could afford to get my nails done, so all the other cunts on my street wouldn't take me for yesterday's trash!

"Sam," Freddie starts, but I'm not finished. He's just shooting bullets at a forest fire. I won't even give him the chance to put me out.

"I didn't have to decide between a lease I can't afford on my

own, and buying Nathan new boots because guess what? The fucking transmission needs to be fixed!"

"Sam," he repeats in that husky, compromised lisp.

"So, I'm going to find Nathan, with *or* without you. Because..." Gravity pulls at my jaw, the words hanging off my teeth. "I can't lose my son, Freddie. I can't."

The palm of his hand reaches out and presses the back of my hair, guiding the matted thoughts beneath it to his shoulder, which smells like old grease and chimney smoke, the most comforting scent I never wanted.

Waves come. My whole upper body quakes against him. Sobs are too dry to cleanse any fabric he's wearing but still leave a physical manifestation of complete breakdown on his shirt. Each tide lasts an eternity, and each subsequent calm between them is no less painful in my chest.

"You did everything anyone could have. Derek left you in this mess, Sam. You did not create it."

I can't even muster acknowledgement before another shudder of rabid emotion flows through me.

"He destroyed your trust, your future. Severed the bond between you. Was a scum-of-the-earth thing to do. But don't be a goddamned martyr, Sam. Just don't. Running into a burning house Nathan may not even be in? What will that accomplish? Really?"

Breath is short but returning to me, slowly. I can finally manage just more than a whisper but shake my head.

The words are just not ready.

"What will that accomplish, Sam? Because I tell you, it didn't do shit for me. And they won't even talk to me now. So, I want to hear it, from you. *What* will running into that bullshit bring you?"

Sniffling the pungency of middle-aged tears back, I am able to pull my legs back to an upright position.

A thousand excuses are all I can offer him.

And that's when I see it; the silhouette behind his window, a hooded figure that drapes across my field of view like a storm cloud, and the long-sleeved elbow that sends glass shattering in our direction.

"*Freddie*!" I scream, but there is no scream, a smothering pillow over the face of one, a scream in name only.

The moment of swimming in a sea of shards, much like the ones under my tires, takes an eternity. Glares of light fly in every

direction- front seat, backseat, against my arms and in our laps.

"Surprise, you fucking illegal!!" the silhouette yells with absolute glee. Not content to lurk in the shadows, it now has a face, one that can't be older than twenty-five. Other outlines flood my drying vision, and trying to catch full glimpses of them all, I come up with none.

The door is pulled open, and Freddie is dragged from his seat, yanked into mid-air and then left to plunge the rest of the distance.

Don't be a hero, Sam.

Don't be a martyr, Sam.

Just don't.

Peter

I still remember Viktor's first words to me.

They are burned into my mind like the mania of his stare. There are a couple of skeletons behind them and many more to come. They haunt every conversation now, the subliminal message under every word we share.

I wonder if Syd thinks on her first conversations with him. I don't know how they met but have a couple of good ideas. All I need to know is the relationship they've shown me, and even that is a chaotic solidarity at best.

I used to think she was the more stable of them. Viktor would fly into a rage, and she would calm him, like an owner heeling her dog. Viktor could go zero to ten in a second, and Syd's snarl pushes him down to six.

Something is different about her now.

Our march has led us far from the anarchy at the Square. Larry, scrolling on his smartphone, a bat balanced on his shoulder, informs Syd on the latest developments.

"Fuck," he says, "Governor called in the National Guard."

"And?"

"That's not good, lady," he replies, "Hope you and Viktor got a good plan, because these government fucks gon' call in the Bureau, and we're all gon' go to prison. I mean, you dumbasses went and posted this shit on Facebook."

"Not my decision, Ronald."

"Oh, that's great. So, Viktor did that?"

She wears annoyance like different shades of blush, but there's a new color under that poker face.

"Oh man," Larry says, "You know, I got kids. A house. I work in a fucking mailroom for a newspaper nobody reads, but I have a life out of it. This shit for you is a side hustle, to make some extra money."

It's despair in her eyes.

"What are you trying to say, Ronald?"

"Saying I ain't going to prison for that son of a bitch. Doesn't

even pay that well." He extends his bat arm and drops it. It clatters on the sidewalk and rolls away. "Not to mention that crazy fuck killed Andre. Know where I had to bury that poor bastard? Never mind, you don't want to know. Now I have nightmares, Syd. Can't get his face out of my head."

"Know what, Ronald?" Syd asks. "I really don't give a shit at this point. You want out, call up your boss and tell him you're out. See how well that ends for you."

Larry stares at his phone, inner conflict raging between panicked expression and shaking hands.

"Pick up the bat, Ronald. Your kids are going to be fine. But make a scene like that again, I'll visit them myself."

Syd walks ahead of us, grumbling. Larry shakes his head and picks up the aluminum bat off the ground, his paunch limiting quick movement. He drags his feet in silence.

I leave Larry to his internal turmoil, jogging to catch up to Syd and ask her what the plan is. I'm not sure she has a plan, but maybe she needs to be asked, anyway.

I don't want to feel bad for her.

"I'm sure Viktor didn't plan to have us wander aimlessly," I tell her. "There must be a plan, Syd."

She lights another cigarette. "Plans are for people who have no confidence, Peter," she retorts between passive-aggressive puffs.

"Or Viktor hasn't told you his plans. He's changed, hasn't he? Disappearing all the time, not telling you the most important things? Sound familiar?"

She scoffs, her feet shuffling forward with mine.

"You don't know what the hell you're talking about, Pete. Maybe you could concentrate on that conscience of yours. It might save you yet."

"An hour ago, you told me I'd be consumed with guilt for the rest of my life. No, I think you're projecting, Syd. Viktor is going off the rails, and you're trying to hold all his shit together. How long are you going to enable him?"

She takes the longest haul yet off her shivering cigarette, now a vertical tower of ash. She holds onto it, seeing how long it will buckle under its weight before scattering to the light breeze.

I grab her arm, to stop her pushing forward; to look me in the eye and tell me she doesn't really believe in all this.

"How long, Syd?"

Reactively, she presses the burning end of her smoke into the back of my hand. My fingers seize outward, releasing their grip on her. She pushes the embers even then, ignoring sounds I don't recognize as my screams, as I smell flesh burning, skin convulsing against the agony of fire.

"*What the fuck?"* I clutch my smoldering hand, cradling it close to my solar plexus, lest she come for me again.

"Don't *ever* lay a fucking hand on me, again," Sydney says, flicking the warped cigarette into the street. "Sick of teaching stupid men this lesson."

A grimace stretches and claws at my mouth's corners with the pulse of my raw knuckles. I turn the hand over, where a red blotch differentiates itself from the rest of pigment, epicenter of the earthquakes through my entire arm.

"Fool yourself all you want, Mayhew!" I tell her. "You're not part of the clique. You don't have Viktor's ear like you think. You're just a soldier for hire, waiting on a promotion."

She reaches into the back of her jeans, revealing her gun, the same used to kill Jason and Robert earlier. Just as fast, it's pressed to my temple, her fingers grabbing a patch of hair to hold my head back.

"You don't know when to stop talking, do you?"

"That's right," I spit at her, "Fucking kill me, like you killed them. Just murder your problems away, Sydney."

She smirks. "Sounds like an invitation to me."

"It won't change anything, you deluded woman! Guys like Viktor, they use people to any end. He'll push you away, like he's probably already done. Then he'll put you in a situation you can't walk away from."

The cold steel against my head relaxes. The forearm holding it angles out, and pressure on my temple fades. Not sure if that will be enough to spare me a bullet, but safety's been on this whole time. That has to say something for odds of survival.

Chewing her underbite, Syd completely lowers the gun and lets go of me. She turns like a ghost, looking out at eternity ahead.

I keep coming way too close to death, lately.

"Everything you've done for him," I say through panting, "everything you're willing to do, Syd. Is it worth it?"

I can't see her face now, but the gun at her side and the back of her lowered head speak volumes enough. Her blonde hair, shoulder

length and in perfect, untangled freefall, musters enough strength to blow with the wind, itself permeated with the smell of arson a mile away.

"If you two are caught, every law enforcement agency in this fucking country will be after you. Your life will be over, Sydney. Is that what you want?"

When she turns around to face her shrunken posse of me and Larry, who lingers in the background, seemingly oblivious—or traumatized—her trademark scowl is included.

Whatever change of heart there was, is gone.

Whatever panic there was, is no longer.

"We're almost back at Lord Street. There's somewhere I want to stop first. Then we'll go see what Viktor wants us to do next."

"We're going to see Viktor?" I ask.

Did nothing register?

"Of course," she says, replacing the gun in the back of her jeans, smirking. "You won't drive a wedge between Viktor and I that easily, Peter. If you're trying to flip someone, you should have gone with Ronald. He doesn't seem to want to be here much, either. Seriously, who knew men could be such little girls?"

Larry and I share a glance, but he looks as willing to defend his masculinity as I am.

"Let's go," Syd says, "We've wasted enough time here, and there's a place I want to hit up before we get back to the warehouse."

Freddie

Almost joined the army once.

Never told Esmeralda that. None of my kids, either. Didn't tell my school friends Derek and Sam, even this Rodney fella who hangs out at Dead Dean Sykes' watering hole and thinks himself the second coming of Christ, way that man asks you to share your problems with him like a bottle of dark rum.

Sykes' son runs the place now, and he ain't no Dean Sykes. The man got a lot of stories and sadness out of me over the years, 'least since my teeth went to shit because I couldn't get a persistent salesman to insure me if I tried, let alone a dentist to serve me. No corporation in all America would dare cover my ass.

As for these hoodlums who've gone, pulled me out of a green Cherokee onto a road full of fuckin' glass and proceeded to whip me with their bats and chains and fisticuffs- well, they're just bad apples in a tree full of stunted vegetation.

Things were tight. Esmy and I were fighting all the time. Jason was three years old, his sister Emily two. They ran around the house like it was on fire and never fuckin' stopped.

Andrew Vander Waithe was the son of my adopted father's best friend, and like a brother to me. He went and wanted to sign up to fight the Taliban. We were twenty-two and three. Both had wives and little kids. Trying to run away from our lots in life, I guess. Seemed better than being Dean Sykes' weekend dishwasher.

I couldn't get in because of an old football injury, and Andrew died in Afghanistan three years later when his armored vehicle hit a roadside bomb. Sykes keeled over the following year, and it all went to shit after that.

I think about my friend as each weapon pounds my back, whips my arms and breaks skin everywhere between. Think about Andy's Hummer driving along handily, before triggering one hell of a fireball, trying to keep the wetness down my back that faintly smells like blood out of mind. Ignore obscenities and slurs from the mouth of pissants, and think of my friend, the bravest fuckin' man to ever walk this earth.

My vision darkens like the night circling around us. I can no longer feel their blows. Just vibrations of a bone, a tooth, a skull. It can only be a minute or two but trying to stay attached to my peaceful place feels eternal. Like being sucked out of a falling airplane, both crash landing and death seem imminent and slowed at the same time.

How you gonna tell your woman, Conway?

I wasn't going to.

I was going to run away. From my children, Esmeralda, banality in general.

You watch, Freddie, I'll be Captain in five years. Less, even.

What I wouldn't give them to have them back, Andy.

To do it over again.

The vibrations stop. I wait for them to start again. Arms get tired. I understand. Shouting continues. There's no telling what they say.

Each breath is like shrapnel.

Streetlights hang above us like a sun, but all I can see are their kaleidoscopic imitations, for the world has become an existential blur.

A river of red can't be held by my tongue, flowing over the stubs of remaining teeth in my head like they're rocks of a waterfall, splattering on the pavement between my hands.

I look up, ready for the killing blow, but my assailants have scattered. A black shroud, dark as a goddamned thundercloud in Kansas, with tentacles of black smoke- so vapid, you could pass through them- zips around their panicked movements.

Sam?

It darts and thrashes, dispelling the shadows in leather and riot masks and boot tight jeans. Like an old-school monster movie, this thing, with its formless, malleable density, is merciless.

One by one, they are being hunted by something, dragged kicking and screaming to incapacitation, away from my line of sight and towards...well, nothing perhaps.

My head hits the pavement. I don't feel the gravel scrape my beard, the tarmac scrape flesh under it, my eyes close or myself pulled abruptly into pitch black.

The shroud can take me, so long as it takes my attackers, too.

You're signing up too, Conway?

Ain't leaving me behind, Andy.

Peter

It only takes one moment to change the world, you know.

Viktor's first words come back to me, over and over again. He asked me for a cigarette outside a convenience store and those were his first, in theory, but the first relevant thing he said are the ones that haunt me.

And what moment is that? I asked, unsure of this lanky, red-headed dude in front of me, decked out in a leather jacket he could have easily found in a donations bin, thinking the ability to grow a beard longer than his pubic hair justified manhood.

What's your name, kid?

Peter, I admitted, wishing I had given him a fake one. Something my mother would have named me if she wasn't busy sucking back gin and mourning the grandfather I was named after.

I'm Viktor, he said, extending a thin hand.

Quinn.

I shook it, and believed him, that he could really incite change inside of a minute. At least, believed *he* believed.

Syd joined us, locking the door to her place of employment, holding a habitual cup of black coffee in one hand, cigarette and lighter in the other.

This is Syd.

A very special girl.

Don't fucking speak for me, Viktor.

The lot where the chip wagon resides, full of cracked paints and peeling stability, is awash in loose gravel and shadows. A black iron barrel sits by the screen door, secured with a rusting padlock to prevent vandals that have a million better things to fuck with in this town.

Larry hangs back as Syd casually strolls up to the structure. I can't see her face, but can't help but feel this is a pretty random target for the glee I'm sure coats her expression.

I've been here before.

"What are we doing, Syd?" I call to her, but she doesn't respond. She continues to seemingly plan her next thought, the shoulder-

length blonde blowing about her neck. “Why are we here?”

“To make a point,” she says, but in barely more than a whisper.

You won’t drive a wedge between Viktor and I that easily.

Great.

“I know this place,” I say, “Some old black dude runs it. Frankie, or something. I don’t think he’s done anything to deserve whatever you’re about to do.”

She turns to face me, head cocked in disapproval. No mercy in the corners of her twisted mouth, not a thought for the wake of destruction she’s prepared to leave behind her.

“None of them deserve it, Peter. Not really. But when the culture of this country prioritizes them over us, without whom our fucking greatness would not be possible, it’s just business, you hear?”

“You can’t possibly be this bitter, Sydney.”

She scoffs. “Look the fuck around you, asshole. People in this very county are losing their homes. Livelihood. Families are uprooted because America Corp decided it would be fun to relocate to fucking China and pay pennies to foreigners instead of the people who work all their lives to buy the cheap crap America Corp is selling.”

“And this has.... what to do with this guy?”

She smiles, that horrible, twisted grin.

“Change begins at home, Pete.”

On the winds of her last words, there is a sudden change in Sydney’s expression, which immediately confuses me. I am numb to the rhyme and reasoning, already. It all blends together now.

I don’t expect fear to be a mood in Syd’s current repertoire. But the widening of her eyes is unmistakable, like a misbehaved child humbled by a spanking hand, and the gasp escaping from her throat negates any real warning she might give me.

Thud.

Pain in the back of my skull is immediate. Knees buckle. Cracks rip through my spine as it finds a comfortable collapse, against whatever physics stand in the way. The ground is the closest comfort to me. I reach for it, also knowing the choice does not exist to refuse.

The world is a blur.

Blood in my mouth.

It only takes one moment...

Syd.

She is holding her gun again.

A very special girl.

Pointing it at my assailant.

Blood on the rocks.

Don't fucking speak for me, Viktor.

Sydney's silhouette spins. Her back is to me. Head is foggy. She yells out. Stop.

A very special girl.

Stop!

A gunshot.

The world is a carousel.

It only takes one moment, Viktor says.

Ignition. Sydney disappears from sight.

Blood in my eyes.

This is Sydney. A very special girl.

The world is in flames and has devoured my ability to render an image of the intense heat that brushes against me.

Everything darkens.

The world is asleep.

Samantha

VIOLENCE IS EVERYWHERE.

Television lays it out. Video games glorify it. Movies entertain us with it. Society is supposed to protect us from it, but families practice it against misbehaving children. Governments engage in it, and the media plays right along.

Looking at bodies of four unconscious boys- I hesitate to call them men- abandoned in the street by their friends to moan and groan with broken arms and busted kneecaps, I know this night will never leave me.

Barely conscious, they plea for help with their eyes, ones their mother probably loved and never imagined would be overtaken by such animosity, but don't ask with their mouths. One clutches his shattered arm, broken with a lead pipe I grabbed from his unsuspecting friend, who is one of the brave souls to desert him. Another hugs himself, rolling back and forth over a hip that broke like glass.

They remind me of the kids who torment my son.

"Lesson for next time, boys," I wheeze, dropping the pipe on the ground between them, where most of my passenger window is also laid to rest. "If you're going to try and rape a woman in the streets? Make sure she didn't earn her green belt before dropping out. I might go back now." Stepping around them, I shuffle towards my unresponsive friend. "Seems like a good idea these days, doesn't it? Never know when strangers who don't even know anything about you might try to pull this...*bullshit*.

"Anyway, I hope this gave you boys....a new perspective on life. Stay in school. Away from drugs. Okay? An ambulance should find you kids at some point. Someone. Bye now."

Freddie's arms still protect his face, covered in blood despite the fetal position. I turn him on his back, calling his name. All I receive in response is labored breathing and fluttering eyelids, exposing whites beneath.

Hunched over him on my knees, I pull my phone from a back pocket, dialing 911. The streetlamps directly above us paint my clusterfuck of a life like a stage play, and the jammed signal of a

cellular line is the heckler in every crowd, laughing at me.

I hope Nathan is okay, because Freddie needs a doctor. His head lolls side to side on uneven road, searching for a fraction of consistent comfort.

“Stay with me, Freddie,” I tell him, grabbing his hand with my free one and waiting for the sirens I was so previously eager to see gone.

Peter

My eyes open, but the world is covered in smoke. A thick cloud of black hangs above me, its density in ever-shifting turmoil. It dances and retracts, glimpses of dying orange between pillars of suffocation. The light is not that of a tunnel's end, but an unscalable dungeon with sunshine pouring in the hole my body tripped into.

My eyes adjust, and suddenly, I wish that was all it was.

Through a film of stinging ambiguity, the shapes of a narrative, playing on repeat, become clearer.

The chip wagon behind me is gone, if only in spirit. It is a husk of metal, wood and plastic now, the carcass of a structure that once served ne'er-do-wells and out-of-towners. The roof is collapsed where miniature flames dance on it like a dry log. Jagged edges have replaced what was once the roof, and the black barrel that caused all this destruction, ignited by a stray round from either Syd or Larry, is nothing more than a crumpled iron shell. The loose gravel of the lot is darker, singed by the violent explosion minutes, or hours, earlier.

My head is pounding, collapsing and exploding simultaneously. Skin of my face feels hot and raw to my cheeks, normal to my palm. The hand, however, is a different story. Flesh has peeled away from knuckles, and flares with every closing of my fist.

To my right, Larry lies dead on the ground. His features are mostly gone, burned off like bark from a birch tree. The corpse's right hand is outstretched, reaching for something—a gun, salvation, anything.

Barney's death was much cleaner.

I don't know if Larry got a hold of a weapon, because someone fired and hit the barrel.

Syd.

A very special girl.

Where is she?

I lift my head to escape the tunnel vision of smoke and fire and death, but every inch off the ground brings new degrees of agony.

Maybe she escaped.

She would have come back to kill you.

Maybe she's dead.

She would have come back to haunt you, then.

Forcing myself to sit up, nothing feels broken. Physically, at least. Legs work. Arms are only superficially burnt and scraped. They claw the rest of my body to its feet. Balance is short-lived, and I collapse back to a kneeling position before both shaking legs can finally support me.

A kid comes running by, long black hair draping youthful shoulders, a thin frame and a face that couldn't grow peach fuzz to save itself from awkward annihilation. The boy seems to recognize me, but I can't make him out. He stops running along the sidewalk, staring at me in a pleasant mixture of amazement and disgust.

"It's *you!"* the kid says, mouth agape at the carnage behind me. I struggle to focus on him "Are you okay, mister?"

No sooner have the words escaped his mouth, I am on the ground again, eyes rolling into the back of my head, too weak to stem the tide of darkness that has come for me with an unholy vengeance.

MY EYES OPEN, AND THE world is an earthquake; a hand shaking my shoulder from its dozing state, calling me by my Christian name.

"Peter? That's your name, right?"

The boy is still a blur, but he has a face now. I struggle to place him, but there is something oddly familiar.

"You're awake," he says. "Gonna make it?"

"Yeah," I manage to reply. "Do I know you?"

"My name is Nathan Wallace," he says, "Do you remember me?"

"Aren't you that kid I saved from being flattened by those bullies?" He grimaces, same way he did on his front lawn. "What the flying fuck are you doing here?"

"That's a long story, mister. Can you sit up?"

Without letting me reply, he wraps my limp left arm around his neck, placing his own around my spine and helping me to a vertical position.

"Something happened here," he observes.

My lungs are full of monoxides, gravel and God knows what else. Probably a bad time to want a cigarette, but the compulsion is

there.

"Yeah, it got pretty dicey."

"Who's your friend?" he asks, gesturing to Larry's charred corpse, unfazed by the sight of a dead body. *Must be nice.*

"Oh," I wince. "That's Ronald. He made a couple poor life decisions tonight."

I have to find Sydney.

"It looks like there was an explosion. Was there?"

I reach out for balance as my body forces itself to stand on its own and scan the area for any sign of her. I can't go back to Viktor without Syd. He will think I sabotaged them.

Then again, I'm likely a dead man, anyway.

"Peter?" the boy asks, but my mind is consumed by Syd's whereabouts. If she's dead, there is no one to corroborate my version of events.

"Look! " Nathan says, pointing to a silhouette several feet from the outline of the former food truck. "A girl!"

I follow his line of sight, to where I see her, a small body in the grass, just beyond where the lot's gravel ends. I want to run to her, make sure she's alive, if for no other reason than to save my own skin. My legs do not agree with that course of action, and I have to limp instead.

"Syd!" I exclaim, kneeling beside her and gently moving her face, turning toward the long night, toward me. Her eyes are shut. Her breathing is so shallow, I have to feel a pulse.

She's alive. The metronome of her pumping heart allows mine to restart a bit, but the weight of skipped beats weighs down every subsequent breath I can muster.

Half of her face is badly burned. The cheeks are cooked, an eyebrow gone. What is not raw is sooted, flesh the color of ash and painful wheezing escaping her like nails on a chalkboard.

"Is she your friend?" the boy asks, "Or your enemy?"

A very special girl.

My daddy worked his whole adult life to make this country great.

Don't fucking speak for me, Viktor.

Why don't you shut up, and just let history happen, Pete?

Is she your friend, the boy asks, *or your enemy?*

You talk too much.

Every thought is a gun firing, and I'm not sure how much more bulletproof my conscience is. Looking down at Syd's broken form, I

can’t help but confuse the line between adversary and personal savior.

Friends and enemies no longer factor into this clusterfuck of an equation.

Samantha

The last time I saw Catherine alive was in a hospital.

I had visited her every week for the last ten months, sometimes twice or thrice, but looking back, there was a sense of finality to my final conversation with her.

Your sister Stephanie is being a little cunt again.

My mother had a way with words.

Being back in these hallways where death feels opportunistic and doctors pass you off like hot tomatoes at the end of their shift reminds me life is only worth what you can afford in medical bills, which puts my friend Freddie's value at the cents on the dollar.

The emergency room is chaos, a lively mix of anarchists, nurses, cops and victims. The officers are tense, and the paramedics are harried, while the doctors are pulled gunshot victim to collapsed lung and back to the shooting victim when he goes into cardiac arrest.

People and hues whiz past us, as I stand beside my unconscious friend, laid on a stretcher in a frantic hallway and left to fend for himself. I feel despondent but aware, with only adrenaline and fear to propel me through this nightmare.

She's doing her best, Mom.

I clutch Freddie's clammy hand. The skin of it is rough, like my father's was when I was girl. Catherine never mentioned him again after I turned twenty-five. The mental image she used to taunt me for fifteen years died out and, perhaps sensing this, she stopped talking about him.

Even bitterness has an expiration date. Maybe time will afford Derek the end of mine. After the events of tonight, he seems like a small problem in a big, scary world.

She won't let me drink.

I just want my son back.

Your liver is failing, Ma!

Freddie's fingers tighten around mine. He stirs but his eyes, which are bruising and swollen, do not open.

I guess that makes you a little cunt, too, doesn't it?

Please, Ma. Let the doctors help you. They say you're not taking your medicine.

I can smell the sterility of the room, trying to cover up the stench of permanent death. The lady bunking in Catherine's semi-private has bowel cancer. No amount of disinfectant spares the senses.

A hand around my wrist jolts me. Catherine and Freddie simultaneously. His eyes are open, hers barely so, both inquisitors in the battle for my soul.

They're out to get me, Sammy.

"You're okay!" Freddie stammers, each syllable full of more excruciating breath than the last. "Thank my stars, Sam."

My eyes swell with tears, and I am powerless to stop their burning.

"Jesus, Freddie," I chuckle through tears. "You gave me a good scare."

"We in a fuckin' hospital?" he groans, "Light's blinding." His voice is scratchy, like a vinyl record before the song begins. "" Have I been seen, yet?"

"A nurse was by to check on us."

"She say anything?"

"It's busy here," I say, "Whole town is out of whack tonight. She didn't say a whole lot."

"My arm feels broken." He winces, testing flexibility that is no longer present. "Maybe my collarbone too. I can't fucking tell."

No one's out to get you, Ma.

"Don't push yourself, Freddie. Just take it easy."

A man with short hair and a white coat turns a corner. A stethoscope hangs from his collar on either side, swinging wildly with each set of steps along the marked hallway. He sees us, and slows his pace, stopping at the foot of the stretcher.

"Hi folks, my name is Doctor Halford," he says, neither extending a hand or returning Freddie's attempt to shake his. "I'm sorry it has taken so long to get to you, but we are in full-blown panic here."

"No doubt, Doctor," Freddie croaks, "Appreciate whatever it is you can do for me. I don't have insurance, though, just so we're up front."

Reminder to chide him later for being too forthcoming with that information.

“What was your name, sir?” Halford asks, looking over his clipboard. “We are short on nurses too, so excuse me if I seem hurried. Just trying to make sure everyone is accounted for.”

“Conway,” Freddie says, his expression bracing for bad news of any variety. Rejection of medical help. Missing records of his existence. A statement of further disowning from his children, maybe.

“Ah,” Halford says after a moment. “I’ve got you here. Jason Conway. Thank you, sir. A nurse should be with you shortly to look at that arm.”

He begins to flee when Freddie stops him.

“Not Jason. Freddie. Conway. Now I have a son named Jason…”

Halford chuckles. “Apologies. Long night. I don’t have you on the list. Besides, now that I’m seeing it, that doesn’t look like a gunshot wound. Let me get your name and street address.”

Oh no.

“I don’t have a street address, Doc. But hold onto your white coat there for just one damn second! Are you telling me there’s someone named Jason Conway here? Who’s been shot?”

“It appears that way, sir—”

“I wanna know what color he is.”

“Mr. Conway-”

“I said I want to know what fucking color he is! The pigmentation of that boy’s skin! *Which is it*?”

Even behind the one eye welded shut by burst vessels, Freddie quakes with contempt.

“Is he white or black, Doctor?” I clarify.

Halford bites his lip, looking at the floor.

“He’s colored. Came in earlier with a punctured lung. No exit wound. There are surgeons working on him now, but….it doesn’t look good. His friend was dead on arrival, too.”

Freddie slouches against the stretcher, trying not to believe it, although we both know the odds of it being someone else’s child are slim to none.

I can only pray to whatever God still exists that I won’t hear similar news about my own tonight. As he clutches a broken face and even more complicated emotions, I am beginning to believe he won’t be the only one by the end of it.

....

Peter

When I was young, my sister Kate was run over by the back wheels of a car, crushing her lower left leg. The front knocked her off the seat of a bicycle my mother had bought for her at a garage sale so she could spend the spare change on liquor, rather than buy her daughter a brand new bike.

It often happened as such. Toys under the tree at Christmas were usually missing parts or broken; the clothes we wore to school reeked of Goodwill and cigarette smoke, and yet that cabinet was always full.

My mother would often say the same thing.

There are kids who have nothing, and you choose to act like a punk.

So, when Kate took a tumble off her rusting, second-hand bike crossing the street on a bad turn, all my mother could focus on was the bike being ruined, rather than her flesh and blood lying paralyzed in the street. Even with witnesses, my mother berated Kate publicly to the point she had to be segregated by police, so as not to upset the crying little girl further.

No wonder Kate grew up to be so bitter. Mom, smelling of day old spirits and chain smoking behind the cordon, cursing her child's name and eyeing the crumpled bike would fuck up anyone.

Why I think of this as the kid and I burst through emergency room doors, each of us holding up one of Syd Mayhew's sides, is a mystery to me. Her right arm slung around my neck, left around the kid's, and her feet dragging behind us has nothing to do with Katherine York.

The town's only hospital is swelling with people, from bleary-eyed doctors to exhausted nurses and the moaning of injured folks all around us.

One guy cradles his broken arm close.

Another presses cloth against a head gash, but the thin towel is saturated in crimson.

A woman in her twenties with fine-braided hair sobs into her hands as she awaits news of a loved one. Three children attempt comfort, telling her Daddy will be okay. She can only shake her

head in response to the news she hasn't told them.

Is this really what Viktor wants?

Like the devil on my shoulder, he appears to my left.

Ideals only take you so far, Peter.

Then to my right, the journey between them is erased from perception.

Kill or be killed.

Fuck or be fucked.

The nurse at reception is only steps away. Syd's dead weight is heavier with every step, Viktor's magic act closer.

I want to remind the world their precious equality does not, in turn, make us unequal.

I look to the flatscreen, perched above the rows of tired, suffering people, if only to avoid locking eyes with the physical manifestation of my trauma.

I look up and see the images much like I saw earlier. Broken glass in California. The National Guard cracking down in Milwaukee. Memphis riots. The media would be salivating if they weren't so busy trying to keep up with the stories rolling in.

I want to leave the world protected from those who would make it a 'better place'.

With a smoke in his hand, sunglasses at the end of his nose, he blows stinking chemicals in my direction. Trying to pull me off course.

It took me a long time to come to grips with the way I feel. About myself.

Almost there.

Time has slowed to a crawl.

About my fellow people and those would threaten everything we stand for.

Not long now.

You are a part of history now, Peter.

The kid and I stop at the desk. Viktor stands behind me, looking over my shoulder as if to give me unsolicited advice. The sounds of the world around me are incoherent. My arms ache from Sydney's weight. My brain hurts, my heart hurts and I feel words rolling off my tongue.

I see the cynicism of the nurse, but I can't hear the things I say, only their vibrations slithering off my tongue and the snake that lives in my conscience behind me, offering Eden.

Let me show you the power the Internet gives us, to spread a message of fury like the world has never seen.

The kid stares at me with concern.

Adjacent to me, Vic raises a revolver, firing ghost bullets, hot air with deafening implications in the opposite direction. No one in the room seems perturbed by it. Not the nurses rushing to Sydney's aid, prying her broken body from my grasp.

Someone call his mother. Poor woman has nobody left.

Not the bevy of injured clientele, waiting on their turn to seek relief from physical wounds. Nothing can be done for their emotional states.

I feel myself falling away from consciousness, as if looking up at the ceiling lights from underwater. Relieved of the weight, I drag my feet into the general waiting area, collapsing into one of the many chairs where people from all walks of life have waited to hear if they would go home as the same person or a dying version of themselves.

My head falls into my hands.

It only takes one moment to change the world.

Darkness.

Freddie

I was nineteen when Jason was born. Esmy was seventeen, and almost lost the baby. I had an athletic scholarship and a chance with the NFCC. She was small and severe in the way she dressed. Woman would never let her damn hair down, but it was what I loved about her. I was full of nonsense, and Esmy had none of it.

My arm is in a cast, cradled to my chest. My shoulder is awash in pins and needles, much like my leg was just days from high school championships. The fall that would end my career came only weeks before Esmy told me she was pregnant.

All I can think about is my son, the baby that survived infection and one obstacle after another. Couldn't walk until he was three. Couldn't speak without therapy, generously paid for by Dean Sykes' poker game losses, hardwon in the backroom of his dilapidated watering hole.

Esmy hated that place.

Couldn't focus in school, no matter how much I disciplined the boy. Wouldn't listen to no counsel but his own, regardless how we yelled.

All the pain and the blood and sweat and the tears, that boy is just another body in the street.

"Freddie," Sam says, touching my shoulder, "It's gonna be okay. The doctors will take care of him."

I don't feel the warmth of her touch, but baby Jason's arms around my neck as Esmy carved a path through grocery store aisles in a huff.

"Yeah," is all I can muster. The lone syllable is torture, but Sammy means well. This ain't her burden.

Sam mutters something under her breath.

"What?"

"I said, my mother died here."

"That so?" I ask, interest waning.

Walk to Daddy, Jay Jay!

"Yeah," Sam says, "The last time I talked to her, she tried to get me to bring her liquor. Said she could hide it from the doctors.

Called it her ‘last meal’.”

Come on, boy! Up and again!

“Parenthood is something, alright.”

“What?” Sam asks. The walls of this hallway are closing in, and I can’t lie on this stretcher any longer. Against her protests, I force my legs over the side.

“Easy, Freddie,” Sam instructs, a hand pressed against my back as she guides me up. “You might feel dizzy.”

“More than these damn doctors are telling me.” I expand and retract shoulder blades, working out the kinks and knots of muscles around them. “I need to find out what’s going on with Jason. Help me up.”

She obliges me, knowing I would do so even without her. My hand in hers, both legs shake as my feet touch the reflective hospital floor. Bare toes stretch, feeling out motivation to see this through, despite the stones in my stomach, weighing me down.

“Freddie,” she pleads as I hunch over, trying to dispel nausea. “What good can come of this? You need rest.”

“To hell with rest,” I mutter, “that’s my boy in there. I know it, Sam. You gonna help, or not?”

She says nothing, supporting me as I stumble toward the end of the hall. She holds my arm as my stronger foot drags the weaker one, a growing sense of dread in every inch. She lets my shoulder bounce against her as we pass people like me, poor saps laid on stretchers in a hallway to groan and grovel at their injuries.

A man with dreadlocks, about ten years older than my son, is unconscious, head turned left so his hair hangs off the far side of the gurney. His face is bloody and mutilated. I stop at his side and wrap a hand around the thick of his wrist. Sammy does her best to hold me up all the while.

“Stay strong, brother,” I tell him.

I know he can’t hear me; or that he has no insurance, just like me, and will be discharged to manage the pain that will haunt him a lifetime alone.

We resume, turning the wallpapered corner to a waiting room in organized chaos; too much despair written upon the faces inside it for any consolation I could ever offer them. The televisions are rioting light as depictions of fires in the streets are intercut with various state governors having their statements on constant replay.

“Mom!”

Behind us, Sam's boy Nathan surprises his mother with an embrace. His weight pushing into her as she holds me up almost sends me fuckin' sideways.

"Oh my God, Nathan!" Sam exclaims. She looks to me, and I allow her to release me, unsure whether I have the actual balance to sustain myself.

"Mom, I'm so sorry," Nathan says, his shoulder length black hair covering sobbing eyes. "I don't know what I was thinking."

"Oh honey," Sam says as she cradles him. "I'm just so happy you're safe." She separates herself. "I just need five minutes, okay? Do you remember my friend Freddie? We went to school together?"

Nathan dries his eyes with a sweater's sleeve. "Hi," he says to me, then turns back to his mother. "Mom, I'm here with someone."

"Who?"

"That guy who saved me from the kids the other day. He's here."

"The guy who..." she starts, but then something clicks. "Where?"

Nathan points to a man hunched in a waiting room chair, barely conscious, holding his head in both palms. Sam tells him to stay with me, and we both watch her make way to him. Across a room of people who are all broken, the same way my bones are shattered, and her heart is irreparably lacerated, she makes her way to him. We watch her stop, kneel in front of him.

The man in the chair mutters into his lap, something I can't make out. They continue conversing like this for a minute and, standing, Sammy returns to us.

"What did you say to him?" the boy asks his mother, and she shakes her head, brown locks crying out for a day at the spa.

"I said what people with good manners say," she replies, "I said thank you."

"Have anything to say for himself?" I ask. "Seems like just another hoodlum to me." The man continues to stare at the floor while the flat screen above him pans between talking heads and chaos in New Orleans, lighting up the streets like the Devil himself was hosting Mardi Gras.

A bright red marquee on the screen advises curfews in at least ten states, rolling by on an infinite loop. The headlines above it scream *CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE ROCKS AMERICA,* while subtitles suggest supremacists are to blame.

This just in, the talking head stammers out as he receives live updates in his earpiece, *two police officers in Montana have shot an*

unarmed teenager. Information is still rolling in, but...

Resisting arrest.

The man below the television sways his head and swims between incoherence and consciousness. He does not see what I see, but he knows something. Something about my son.

I start to limp towards him.

Sam, staring off into space as Nathan peppers her with details of his night, is jolted from her daze as I pass her. Her eyes drill laser beams into the back of my skull. My legs ache with each step like the pit of my stomach that *knows.* He knows what I don't, and I'm getting it out of him.

"Freddie?" Sam calls to me, but I ignore her.

The whole world has gone mad tonight.

This fucking kid knows why.

One more step, Jay!

I'm going to find the fuck out.

Walk to daddy!

The man, between fits of narcolepsy, or whatever he seems to have fallen victim to, pulls a cell phone from his pocket, dialing someone.

Sam calls my name across the increasing distance, and the injured populace between us, but I keep limping forward.

Nothing will stop me now. Except a hand, from my right, out of nowhere. It clasps my shoulder, pushing down on my weakened bones.

You can't stop this, Sammy.

You almost got this, Jay Jay!

I need to know.

"Excuse me," the voice attached to the hand says, but it contains none of my friend's pitch. It is older, heavier. I turn, and a shorter, burlier nurse has confronted me.

"Are you Mr. Conway?" she asks, tepid despite years of delivering bad news.

"Yeah," I tell her, looking back to the man in the chair, talking on his cell. "That's me."

She lowers her head.

"It's your son, Jason. He is your son, correct? Jason Conway?"

I forget the man in the chair, all my intensity and emotions snapping to her. I forget the questions about what he saw, what he knows.

This woman knows something, too.

"What is it?" I ask, but the question is an earthquake off my tongue. She recoils slightly, drawing shoulders back. "Tell me what's going on, I beg you."

"I'm sorry, sir," she says. The rest is unheard, just guttural sounds in slow motion. Lip reading. Her eyes tell me everything I need to know; that the boy in my dreams, who walked a thousand failed steps to master the right one, is among the angels.

And here I am, left with only devils, or so it fucking seems.

Viktor

My father Harry ended his life a bad man.

He wasn't always so. There was a time he kissed my mother like he meant it or took us in his lap to read us stories. There was a time he would send business associates away because family came first in Harry Quinn's mind, and bedtime was a ritual.

It was all a mask until the devil in him was ready to take hold, leading our family to ruin.

Rupert Smith, for all his knit sweaters and mahogany furniture, has yet to see the devil in himself.

I see it and raise my own to match.

"This was a mistake," Rupert muses, seated behind a massive desk which, for its size, holds relatively little interest to me.

A picture of his wife, smiling because his money bought her those teeth, so she had better fucking smile for him.

A stack of papers that, in the context of a retired seventy-year old telecom mogul, has more to do with decoration than relevance.

What Harry would have given to live this kind of luxury. To own silk curtains and Persian rugs and first-edition books I can't help but to touch with the ash of my hands.

I light a cigarette. Its plumes drift upward into a derelict cloud.

"Which part, Rupert?" I ask. "The part you listened to me about running for governor, or the part you didn't listen to? About manufacturing change. Or were you so enthralled by the taste of power; it made your hearing weak?"

"Put that out, Quinn. My wife will have a fit if she smells that. Filthy habit, you know. Should quit while you can."

I place the filter between my lips, drawing the succulence of poison chemicals deep into my lungs. There is no feeling sweeter.

"You are ignoring the issue at hand, Rupert."

Smith sits back in his chair, the weight on his already padded form relieved. "And what issue is that, Quinn? That I should listen to a *felon* more carefully? Look what your machinations have wrought tonight. You have half the country in chaos!"

The morality of others is laughable at times, especially those

whose morality comes out in times of desperation.

"I did no such thing, Rupert. The desire was in them. I only helped open the door."

Panic dresses his eyes in a thousand parts.

"And what *is* the endgame? How far does this go, Viktor? Now, I have to go on national television, as a candidate in a very tight race, and denounce the man who caused all this ruckus! *You."*

My cell phone rings from my pocket. It vibrates, kicking and screaming like Smith's conscience; a liability I am happy to no longer possess. Guilt is the cigarette I extinguish upon his fireplace mantle. Its ashes scatter upon flawless wood, varnished to a fault.

I tell him to hold the thought and answer the call.

"Vic," Peter says in my ear, "there's something I have to tell you."

"Peter," I reply. As I pace in front of the gloss-varnished desk, Smith's accusatory glare stalks me, from one end of the room to another. "I can't tell you how happy I am to hear from you."

"Something has happened, Vic."

"A lot has happened tonight. You will need to be more specific, Peter."

"Something with Sydney. She's hurt."

Sydney. My brain zeroes in on her name, the visual it provokes. It is an image neither Peter or Sydney herself would assume to be my first, nor would I dare tell either of them.

A very special girl, indeed.

"I'm sure she is in the best of hands," I tell him, smiling back at Smith's spite. "Give her my best."

I end the call.

There is no time to hear him protest, for they are both naive, children following adults, tugging on their coattails. They are baits, two of many that I have laid in my lifetime, eager to draw the monsters out of men and show off their mutilated husks to the world.

"This is over," Smith asserts. "I am withdrawing my candidacy."

I sigh for his pathetic attempt at integrity; now, when the dominoes have only begun to fall on Lady Liberty's head.

"You will do no such thing, Rupert."

"And what's to stop me?" Smith shrugs. "*You* are a petty criminal with no regard for decency, Quinn. Just like your father."

He's trying to bait me, now, but you don't get to debate the

Devil.

"What's worse, your delusions of grandeur have engineered a national crisis! I have missed twenty-three calls while talking to you, and I don't know why I even waste my time!"

I chuckle.

"Because you're a power-starved old fart with no real backing and more holes in your good name than stars and stripes in Baghdad," I say, "Because you, Rupert Smith, are the template of men, so greedy in your ambition, you have become blinded to the principles we should all adhere to."

Walking to the window, I pull the drapes to glance out upon the deafening effects of a state-wide curfew.

"You dare speak of my father," I continue, knowing I have his full attention, "after what you did to him. After driving the foundation of everything I grew up with to ruin, you still have the balls to mention him."

"It was out of my control, Viktor."

"See," I reply, scanning the skies and the streets for inspiration. "That's the thing about excuses, Mr. Governor. They're in abundant supply until the demand for truth comes out. Until people take control of their destiny. It's not all that hard to give them the tools. Show a knife to a Neanderthal, he'll know just what to do with it."

Smith pushes his spine deeper against the backrest. "You think you're *so* clever. You change one consonant in your name, and you are suddenly so full of confidence. But I remember the scared little boy you were, Quinn. Before all this bravado. I remember fear in those eyes, once."

I let the curtain fall, masking twilight behind it in crimson silk. I am comfortable turning towards him, opening myself up to show him there's nothing inside, returning only mania to unsettle him.

You will fear the devil in me.

They all will.

"It only took one moment, Rupert. One moment to dispel all the fear in my little adolescent heart, and that was holding my father as he died."

"Did you kill him, Quinn? There's no shame in it. He was a very troubled man."

"I would have. Eventually. But like all tyrants, he was the greatest cause of his own undoing. His anger killed him. From that moment on, I had nothing to fear but fear itself. So, you can

continue to play this game, where you try to evoke the little boy that has looked upon so many men like you, but that is all you have."

"And what do you have, Viktor Quinn, that is worth any more than the piss running down your leg at ten years old? You are on the fringes, and will never amount to more than a gnat! A vermin. A nobody!"

Give into it.

"You speak with such conviction, Governor. You will make a great hero of the people. A champion for the founding class. A beacon of prosperity for our great state."

Smith frowns.

"And if I refuse?"

You will meet the Devil in me.

"Then, I leak to the media this was all done at your behest. I have the email exchanges. It's certainly no smoking gun, but the media these days doesn't even go for the smoking gun. They follow the sound of a gunshot, and report whatever the fuck they find. And, in a political campaign, your name will be tarnished for all time.

"You will lose. Return to obscurity. But none of your accomplishments in business will be remembered. None of your achievements celebrated. People only remember you for the one scandal you caused. And this? This is no scandal. This is an apocalypse upon your very reputation. But what do I know? I'm just a scared little boy, aren't I?

"No, Rupert," I conclude, spreading my hands over the desk, letting them grow wider apart as my full weight bears down on it like my stare does to him. "*I* am a catalyst. Put on this goddamn earth to make sure a certain spark goes off, so career arsonists can have a taste of their own medicine. They set fire to social safety nets with no regard for the people who have that, and *only* that. They pour Bourbon on the American Dream and strike a motherfucking match. Men like you, the only kind of man allowed to operate such an office with impunity, run rampant.

"But men like you, Rupert, have to be kept in check. They have to be owned, or they end up owning all of us."

I separate from the desk, resuming pacing back and forth on the giant, priceless rug, pulling another smoke from my breast pocket and lighting it.

Smith, quiet until now in my monologue, responds. “You can’t possibly believe you have this power over me, Quinn. Your father thought he did, and he paid for it in spades.”

“My father was a fool,” I say. “There’s no argument there. I am not Harry, Rupert. I beg you, don’t make that mistake with me.”

“If Harry was weak,” Smith says, pumping out his chest. “I have no doubt you’re half the man he was. Harry knew when to stand down.

“So no, you are not Harry, Viktor. You are a poor imitation, with your prison tattoos and unkempt beard. Your father would be ashamed of you.”

I close my eyes but keep the smile, for I know it unnerves him, bamboo chutes under the fingernails of panic. I think of the cellmate who changed my life, whose flowing hair and keen mind put me on this path. The thought of him keeps me calm.

“Harry is dead, Rupert. And yet, you seek to use him as a shield against me. You will need a phalanx before I’m finished with you.”

“You’re a fucking psychopath, Quinn.”

I chuckle. “So many people have all these…words to describe me. Degenerate, nihilist, psychopath. But I’m…I don’t know. For lack of a better term, let’s call me a philosopher.”

“A philosopher? That’s what we call inciting riots and destroying businesses and attacking innocent people?”

I shrug.

“Even philosophers can start a fire when the world gets too cold, Smith. Just because I use my brain more than my hands, does not mean I can’t wield a weapon.”

Smith gestures to his lower left.

“In this drawer is a Smith & Wesson. It was the first gift my own father gave me. Love and approval did not come easy to me either, Viktor. Don’t go thinking you’re the only gun in the room. Too many cowboys have ended up dead that way.”

“What are you trying to say, Governor?”

Smith folds hands in his lap, a wry smile on his face. He is trying to debate the Devil, but the Devil has yet to come out, and it still can.

“I’m trying to say all of this chaos you have concocted is obviously a scheme to discredit me or ruin my reputation for what happened to Harry. I have done all I can for your family-”

“You have done nothing!” I yell. The monster grows stronger, the

more he resists. But I will prevail. “You drove him to disgrace!”

Smith shrugs.

“My only point is, that to physically harm me would do far more damage to you than to me,” he says, opening the drawer beside him, “That, and I’m a pretty good shot, Quinn. Now play your fucking card or get out of my house.”

“What’s the matter, Governor?” I ask. The monster has abated, at least temporarily. “Won’t kill an unarmed man?”

“I will in self-defense. Now, I ask you to leave peacefully. What will it be?”

Harry Quinn ended his life as a bad man. The father who raised me to the tender age of six then disappeared into a dark bottle and never emerged. Eleven years in his echo chamber shaped the man I would become, and the Devil inside him. I walk to the door that matches the blood stain paint job, turning the gold handle clockwise and exit stage.

Behind me, I hear the sound of a desk drawer closing.

Peter

This is over.

Syd is down. Larry is dead. Viktor is MIA. The woman who spoke to me, thanked me for saving her son from neighborhood punks, has come and gone. My mind is corrupted with tentacles that seize its matter, pulling every thought into post-traumatic despair.

The lights are too bright.

The sounds are too loud.

Cries of children, sobs of adults.

My fiancée Angie undresses for someone else, lays against their chest at night. She is happy. I am happy for her.

It must be nice to live for something worthwhile.

Samantha

Religion is a bleak affair.

The church is dimly lit, and even then, I'm sure light only goes where God himself wills it. If He even exists at all, it's as a mockery.

Derek's mother was a devout Catholic. We never cared for each other, much as Catherine never cared much for me. She would pray to everything and baby Jesus six times a day, rocking back and forth in her thick cotton gown, holding her rosary to the sky. On her deathbed, she prayed God deliver her, but cancer looks like anything but deliverance.

"Come to confess?" a voice, detached from my awareness as it could ever be, startles me.

A woman, no older than thirty, with shoulder-length blonde hair and a black turtleneck, approaches me. A gold locket hangs from her neck. She is thin, with gray eyes that match the color of streets and overcast days.

"No," I chuckle, "not big on confessions, to be honest."

She takes a seat in the pew beside me, her movements so light, the bench does not creak or groan under its new distribution of weight. Several rows behind us and in front are vacant, but I still hear the ghosts of people singing.

"Doesn't seem practical to come to a Catholic church if you're not confessing," the woman says, "or receiving communion."

"I'm sorry, *who* are you?"

The woman shakes her head with a smile. "Oh, I'm an atheist. I don't believe in any of this."

"What is an atheist doing in a Catholic Church?"

"I used to believe," she says, "but I've seen things that make me question why I want anything to do with such a creator."

"What kind of things?"

She hesitates.

"I almost died. I remember being on my deathbed, in another life, surrounded by fear in the faces of the people trying to save me. And I didn't want to be saved. At all.

“When I woke up,” she continues, “I wasn’t the same person I was before. I was stronger. More aware. But I was reliving my death. Over and over. I was so caught up in mourning the part of me I had to lose to survive each time I went through it.”

Is this woman high?

“What are you talking about?” I ask, “Each time you…went through it?”

“The human mind is a powerful thing, Samantha.”

I never told her my name.

“Who are you?”

The woman finally smiles, the smallest corners of her mouth only slightly raised as she sits beside me, legs crossed, her skin tight leggings ending where her laced boots begin.

“I am a messenger, that’s all. I wasn’t here before and I won’t be here later, and my whereabouts and identity should not concern you. What *should* concern you is the message.”

How does she know my name?

“And what-what is the message?”

The woman cocks her head, smile dropping from her face. There is no emotion in the eyes piercing my soul. There is only cold, rational thought.

“You are more than the sum of parts your husband left you, Sam. You have suffered too long under this illusion that Derek took all your strength with him. The contrary, rather, is true. He left you everything worth having.”

“Is it wrong to say I’m freaked out in front of our Lord?” I ask her. “You seem to know a lot about me, lady, and I know nothing about you.”

“You are still hung up on the messenger, Samantha. Hear the message.”

“So, not even a name?”

She relaxes her shoulders.

“Fine. I’m Olivia. And I can tell you that your husband will not be happy for long. Seen it a thousand times. He will regret it when that woman leaves him. He will regret it the day he is considered terminal. He will regret it on his deathbed.” She reaches out, laying her left hand over my right. “This is no longer your burden.”

As her flesh touches mine, I feel lighter. Like the weight of the world is lifted off me. I am not sure if it is dark magic or the reassurance of another human being genuinely telling me it will be

okay. Latter seems the more likely.

"I feel broken,' I tell her, "Like I've been shattered in a thousand pieces, and I'm trying to use every piece for any old thing. The part of me that wanted to live wants to die. The part of me that wanted to be loved is too spiteful to entertain the thought. It's like trying to use the toaster, only to plug in the microwave. Nothing works."

Olivia's hand tightens around mine.

"That all ends now, Sam."

"What, are you just going to flick a switch and make it all better? You didn't hear me. I'm broken."

"There are forces at work that are greater than you or I. I did not say it was going to get better. It has the potential to get much worse. I have done all I can until now to prevent it, but we're in the middle of a chain reaction."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"The events of tonight will have a ripple effect that will skew the socioeconomic fabric of this country. It will worsen racial tensions for years to come, if not decades. It was engineered by a man who has been led astray, by someone I know quite well. I am trying to save this person, and it is unfortunate the man who brought this on us was manipulated in such a way."

I am so confused.

"So, are you CIA or something? Federal agent of some kind?"

Olivia sighs. "I'm none of the above. Just a messenger, Sam. You believe in something, a higher power, or you would not have come here after you left the hospital."

So many questions, none of which I can count on her to answer.

"Are you following me?"

Olivia chuckles, clasping hands in her lap. "There is no way to explain how I know what I know. That you would believe, anyway. Consider it divine intervention. *Deus ex machina*. There *are* forces greater than you at work."

"Somehow," I admit, "I don't believe that anymore. I should. It's quite arrogant of me to be of that mindset. But I don't believe you're actually sitting here with me or that I have some greater purpose than wallowing in my despair. I feel like someone has reached deep inside my chest and pulled out my heart to taunt me with it, and this is a nightmare I can't break out of."

"Like I said," Olivia replies, "You are awake now. It is a process. It took me a few times to adjust as well. There will be backslides.

Some days will be worse than others. But every time you die from now on, there will be renewal. You don't even have to leave your body to attain it. That," she finishes, "is the greatest gift you can find."

This lady is something else.

"So, what happens now?" I ask.

Olivia reapplies the most subtle of smiles.

"Now, you find your faith again, Samantha. You pick up the pieces and put yourself back together. You raise your son, reconnect with people. Maybe you fall in love again."

I scoff.

"Somehow, I doubt that."

"The world is yours now. You decide what to do with it."

She stands and exits the row, so gracefully, no shuffling is required to avoid one bench and another. Walking to the doors behind them, Olivia leaves as anonymously as she appeared, without so much as a sound.

I am left to consider what a bleak affair this has all become.

Peter

It only takes one moment, one of millions in the fabric of time, to realize how much you can live with. For all the time spent avoiding empathy for others, I am not willing to be their executioner. I cannot stomach the kind of world Viktor and Sydney envision for their children. I won't be their pawn anymore.

The strip of road between boreal wasteland is dark ahead, but for my Honda's high beams. The road turns and twists, sometimes violently, as if trying to compel me to return. *The journey is too dangerous.*

The world is too dangerous.

One road is nothing.

I have lived my entire life; told I could be anything I wanted. I could be a doctor, or a movie star, or a fucking rodeo clown if I wanted to be. But where was the opportunity?

Get out of my head, Viktor.

"Hello, Peter," he says, appearing in my rearview mirror, sitting in the seat directly behind me. The hallucination startles me, causing my arms to twitch and volley the Accord into the middle of the road with a slight scream before I manage to jerk the wheel back right. The car settles back into its lane, heading straight.

"Little on edge, are we?" he asks, lighting a cigarette. I don't see him as the suit-adorning devil he has become, but the Viktor I know, complete with a muscle shirt, three-day old scruff, and sunglasses.

"Why are you in my head *all* the fucking time?" I ask him, seeing the corners of his mouth pull on the cigarette in my rearview mirror.

"Want a smoke? It will help. Trust me."

"What the fuck do you care, Quinn? I'm one screw loose of a mental patient, thanks to you."

Viktor chuckles. "'The whole secret lies in confusing the enemy, so that he cannot fathom our real intent.' That's the Art of War. Sun Tzu. My father used to read it to me. My mother begged him to stick to children's tales, but I can see now he was preparing me."

“Preparing you for what, exactly?”

“Pete, I have struggled my entire life. I have struggled with the generation of working class Americans who can’t get jobs because of quotas and reparations and affirmative action, who can’t buy houses because of real estate bubbles and saturated foreign investment. I have struggled with the policies of these so-called lawmakers who open the floodgates and let scores of refugees in, who only come to drain the system you and I depend on.”

He’s said that to me before.

Christ, my brain replays him like broken home movies.

Think, Peter.

What does Viktor want? I try to place his Sun Tzu quote. If that conversation can be pieced together, I may understand him better. Viktor can spew all the regurgitated dialogue he wants in my mirror, chain smoking until I can fathom myself suffocating.

I have a thread.

In the shadows ahead, a unique silhouette shuffles forward, one limb over the road’s shoulder in a familiar gesture. As my car slows, so as not to strike him with my side mirror, the headlights illuminate a man with long, thinning hair and a Hawaiian shirt, dragging his feet.

What on Earth is anyone doing out here, past midnight, in the middle of nowhere?

“Doesn’t seem like a good idea,” Viktor warns behind me. “Never know when one of these hitchhikers is gonna go full Ghostface on you.” He continues smoking, filling my car with fumes I’m not sure are even there.

I ignore him.

Without power windows, I have to reach over the passenger seat to open the one closest to him.

“Need a ride, stranger?” I call out my rolling vehicle. He thanks me and I press down on the brake completely, allowing him to enter the passenger side. Day old stubble coats his cheeks, and a pair of rose-colored glasses rest on his nose.

“Appreciate the ride, friend,” he says, “There’s a gas station just before the Interstate. You can drop me off there if it’s not too much trouble.”

“This dude looks like a serial rapist,” Viktor says, but the stranger can’t hear him, and I won’t entertain him. My brain is still searching for its connection.

“It’s no problem,” I tell the hitchhiker.

Viktor leans forward, whispering between the headrest into my left. “Ask him what the fuck he’s doing here. Ask him…ask him if he’s gonna fuck you in the ass before he dumps your body in the wood and steals this shitbox of a car.”

“So, did your ride not show up or something?” I ask the stranger.

“Something like that,” he mutters, staring with me into the tunnel of despair ahead. “Let’s say it’s been a very long trip. It has been quite challenging.”

“Where you from?”

Viktor, twitching with annoyance, fidgets in his seat, trying to get comfortable with being ignored. I know he is not here, but the smoke feels real, and I want to gag as he lights one cigarette after another.

“Bit of a nomad, to be completely honest. I travel long distances to come into people’s lives when they need me most. You could call it my life passion, setting individuals on a certain path.”

“And how do you know where to find these people?”

He chuckles. “Human nature is a very predictable thing, friend. All you have to have is an inkling of where something bad is gonna happen, and run towards it instead of running away. Eventually, you’ll find someone who needs the guidance of a stranger.”

“And how many of these people have you helped, exactly?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Thousands. Hundreds of thousands. Numbers become meaningless after a while. Many don’t truly appreciate it. Others do, a bit more. It’s all about perspective. I do it for me, rarely for them.”

“And what do you get out of it, then?”

Viktor leans forward again. “He gets off on it, you fuckwad.” Just as quickly, he is looking back at the ceiling again, the Devil on my shoulder taking a well-deserved smoke break.

“In my mind,” the hitchhiker says, “I am only making up for my own mistakes. Trying to fill a void of my own.”

“What void is that?”

The stranger sighs. “A long time ago, I loved a woman. We went through Hell together. Literally. I started out, trying to save myself, but eventually, it became all about saving her from what I’d become.”

Viktor scoffs. “Yeah. A sad sack.”

The stranger, unable to hear the nuisance in my brain, continues.

“In the end, I lost her again and again. I kept trying to bring us together again, so I could see her one last time.”

“Is she still alive?” I ask, trying to stave off mental images of my ex-fiancee in the arms of another man. “Is there still a chance for you to do that?”

The hitchhiker shakes his head.

“I lost my chance. Hard as I tried, I couldn’t stop her being corrupted. She believed in humanity too much, but it’s not a noble thing. She saw the good but didn’t account for the darkness, and it swallowed her whole.”

“Geez,” Viktor says, “I’d know you were into poetry, Peter, I’d have bought you a fucking Hallmark card.”

“So,” I say, “You do all this, just waltz into conflicted people’s lives to ‘help’ them, as you say, to atone for that?”

The hitchhiker nods. “I try to be more like her. Even at my most nihilistic, I believe *because* of her, not in spite of what happened. If not, I’d have been unable to continue wandering this world after that. I would have only seen the monsters in men, were it up to me.” He looks to me, breaking sight with the midnights ahead of us. “What about you? Surely, you must have lost someone.”

More than I can count, my friend.

My eyes drift to my rearview mirror to my hallucination; snoring with his head against the window, cigarette disintegrating between his lips.

“I did, once,” I say, “She wanted an idea, but never me. She pushed me to go to school, do something worthwhile with my life, and I fought her the whole way because I was afraid. Afraid...of myself. That whatever I tried to do, I would fail.”

“You pushed her away,” he reassures me, but it is anything but a reassurance. “We all need to make mistakes, sometimes. That’s how we grow, friend. Need to distance ourselves from people we have grown comfortable with, in order to assess where they belong in our story. And sometimes, there isn’t a place at the table for them to return to. They may grovel like dogs, nipping at your heels a while, but a starving animal is not themselves.”

“And who is the starving animal?” I ask.

The stranger smiles, perhaps for the first time.

“We’re all starving animals now, my friend.”

We drive in silence the rest of the way, Viktor fast asleep in the backseat, exhausted from haunting me. When I drop the hitchhiker off at his destination, the ghost on my shoulder is also gone, the backseat emptied of all which ails me.

It took one moment. One moment, as the hitchhiker left his parting advice to me, and disappeared into the shadows running adjacent to the Interstate. One moment, as light from the pumping stations poured over my lap, like sunrise in my mind, spilling clarity over the cobwebs that have become my conscience’s greatest draw.

“My father, his name was Harry. He was a good man, once. But the drink got into him, and he became something else entirely. A shroud of himself. Black, like the darkest night, and yet, just enough light left to want to save him.”

This is all has to do with Viktor’s father. Somehow, Harry Quinn is connected to this entire thing. Trying to recall what else Viktor has said of him, I come up shorter than I would like.

“That man took every sense of purpose from me, except making sure he didn’t kill my mother. And when he died, ironically, I felt more lost than ever.”

It only took one moment to realize I may have had a purpose all along.

Part 3

Mayhem

Peter

All my life, I've followed what society told me to do. My mother taught me there were rules for a reason; somebody screwed up and the rest of us paid for it.

My father taught me respect with the back of his hand, and then swatted my siblings and I away with a cheque to my mother, the proceeds of which we never saw.

All my life, I've watched people break the moral codes they preached to me, until my own was merely a shadow of theirs.

Everyone was so focused on the black and white, gray was never a consideration.

Gray is where men like Viktor Quinn live, entrenched so deep in ambiguity, no moral code applies. They can twist logic into its most perverse incarnation, argue murder as a means to an end. They make their deeds seem normal, noble even.

Harry Quinn.

A dead man is the key to Viktor's weakness. A quick Internet search tells everything I don't need to know. Former MBA, fallen from grace in a stock-trading pyramid scheme that forced the better part of Wall Street to rewrite their playbooks on white collar crime.

In the haystack, however, I find a needle.

Rupert Smith, outed as Harry's silent partner in the aftermath, got out unscathed. It was only the beginning of Harry's troubles- a barrage of negative media coverage, the collapse of his real estate brand, and a slew of court dates in which he narrowly avoided imprisonment. However, it was conveniently the end of Smith's, who had come perilously close to ankle bracelets and financial ruin himself.

It makes sense now why Viktor would help Smith in his race.

My daddy was an S.O.B. How about we say that? Pushed me up against a wall, grabbed my sister's ass cheek and downed a forty of Scotch. Beat my mother, blamed corporate America because he had nobody better to pin it on.

Smith led Quinn to ruin, and let his family take the fall.

This isn't about America at all.

This is revenge, plain and simple.

Viktor has been using every one of us.

RUPERT SMITH LIVES in the high end of town which, given the context of our little backwater, means his mansion against a backdrop of suburban homes. He could have lived anywhere after Harry Quinn fell out of his life. Could have moved to the big city and made a fortune.

Instead, he stayed among people he had put out of jobs swallowing up smaller enterprises with prices so low it drove nearly every mom-and-pop competitor out of business. Rich Kaminski's utility company went under in a year of Smith's hostile takeover, funded entirely by venture capitalists in New York and Seattle. Bobby York's cable service closed their doors shortly after. No relation to me, that I know of.

Smith could have left, but instead he stayed among people he had driven to ruin. Harry Quinn included.

Not all monsters wear scary faces.

Viktor's words make sense now.

Smith's house is an affront to modesty. Its lawn is the size of a small parking lot, hedged behind spiked iron gates that only open for limousines and town cars, never the likes of me.

At the gatehouse, a valet stands at attention, aware nobody of importance ever comes to visit. His thick moustache is impressively trimmed to perfection.

Better than a security guard.

Feeling the barrel of the gun against the small of my back, I still need to confirm it's my possession.

Syd's murder weapon is now coated in my fingerprints, and I'm not going down for Jason's death. Nor Robert's or Larry's or whomever else Syd may have killed with it.

The valet is unlikely to negotiate, I think as I exit my car, parked down the street from Smith's house.

God, I hate conflict.

Using the shadows to conceal myself, I slowly crouch along the gate's outside, retrieving the pistol and keeping it pointed at the ground, like my father once taught me.

The trick, Petie, is the recoil. Hold it like.... this, and you are gon' come away with a black eye and a hell 'lotta bruises.

I can still feel the way he manhandled my forearms.

But hold it like.... this, and you have power over the gun. Never give the gun all the power.

Thanks, Dad.

I look down at the pistol, all the power of God in my shaking hands. I keep it pointed at the grass that covers my beaten Converse shoes in midnight mildew. I try to promise myself this is the only time in my life I'll threaten someone, but my mind has become too unpredictable to believe it.

Exhaling what may be the last calm breath I ever take; I continue along the fence.

The valet is buckling under the weight of boredom as I approach, trying to keep his eyes open. This works to my advantage as I step out from the shadows and grab his beige shirt, pulling him back into darkness with me.

"Make a fucking sound, and I kill you right here," I say, with the barrel firmly against his jugular, arm wrapped around his collarbone from behind. I press my back to the fence, checking left and right for signs of trouble.

The man, trembling in my chokehold, raises both hands above his head.

"Please don't kill me! I've got a family!"

"Keep your voice *down,*" I growl at him, "I will let you go if you do *exactly* what I tell you."

"Okay!" he huffs, "Okay. I'll do what you want."

"You are going to radio your supervisor. Tell him there's an intruder at the rear of the house. Then open the gate."

I release my grip on him, pushing him back into the spotlight of his station, and train my sights on him.

"Do what I tell you," I tell him, "Hail whoever is on the other end of that line to the back of the house. Then open the gate."

The valet does as he is told, completely unconvincing on the radio, his lip quivering and fingers struggling to hold onto it. I don't understand the garbled response, but the valet nods as he lowers his hand from his mouth.

I repeat my command to open the gate.

"What's your name?" I ask him as the draw gate's gap widen. I want to know because this will haunt me for a lifetime.

"Mitchell," the valet says, "Why?"

"Walk to me, Mitchell."

“Why?”

I raise the gun to his chest again and tell him to do as I say. He hesitates, then steps forward, back into shadow.

In return, I smack him in the head with it. Mitchell’s knees buckle with the sickening sound of metal on bone, and he collapses in the grass.

“Sorry,” I say, tucking the gun in the back of my jeans. “Couldn’t take the chance.”

I’m in.

I FIND SMITH IN HIS study, tucked into the corner of the second floor. The house is quiet from the moment I enter it. No grandchildren murmuring in their sleep. No pets to alarm the residents.

Gun drawn, I climb the winding stairs, carpeted in material that feels plush under my wet shoe.

The only light on the second level, which begins as an arched balcony and extends in either direction, comes from the end of the hall on the right. I follow it, stepping so light so as not to make wood underneath the carpet creak. The door to my destination is only slightly ajar as I reach it.

I draw a breath and push it inwards.

Warm light spills onto my face as eyes adjust to the glow of a fireplace, its center blocked by a massive red armchair. Every wall hosts a mantle or bookcase of some kind. A giant mahogany desk occupies the far right corner, another enormous chair behind it.

I cannot see the occupant of the chair, facing the light of burning logs. I can only sense his presence.

“Come to kill me, finally, have you?” the disembodied voice asks.

Startled by the awareness I’m here, I train my gun on the back of the chair. There’s no way to know if Smith is armed or even hostile, and I’m no good to my cause if he kills me.

I have to be willing to shoot first and answer to God later.

“Your father always told me I would piss someone off enough to do it,” the voice continues.

I circle to the side, trigger finger full of *rigor mortis* just trying not to pull it by mistake. Smith, seeing I’m not his nemesis, relaxes before changing to a different kind of defensive stance.

“Couldn’t even do it himself, could he?” Smith asks with raised eyebrows, “And who might you be? My executioner?”

“No,” I tell him, “I’m the person who gets you out of this alive, Mr. Smith.” My heart is pounding, and my mouth is parched and every muscle in my body wants to turn and run the other way.

I’ve come too far now.

“And how do you propose to do that? Never mind that I’m hardly inclined to believe you. Especially when you have a weapon trained on me, young man.”

I lower the gun, flipping it in my hand like my father taught me when I needed to pass it back to him. It made me feel like a cowboy back then. He looks at the butt of it with a frown.

I don’t want to be a cowboy anymore.

“Now,” I say, as he takes the pistol in his hand, a harbinger of so many deaths tonight. “You are going to tell me everything I need to know to stop Viktor Quinn. I don’t believe any of this is your doing, Rupert. But I know Viktor. And he will stop at nothing to make sure you don’t walk away from this alive.”

“Well,” Smith says, staring into the pyre he has built himself inside a house of bricks, “if you’re going down this road, you may want *this* back.”

Like my father used to, he repeats my gesture and offers me the gun with an outstretched arm.

Safety first.

“Viktor is merely throwing a tantrum,” Smith says, “but he stands to take a lot of people down with him, including myself. And, I’m beginning to imagine; you as well. And where are my manners? I didn’t even ask your name, son.”

For what I hope will be the last time ever, I replace the gun in my jeans’ waist.

“It doesn’t matter what my name is. Start talking, Rupert.”

All my life I’ve done what society has asked of me. Not to kill, cheat or steal. Not to intentionally hurt anybody. As Smith talks about his relationship with the Quinns and his spin of events, I realize there’s something society doesn’t cover; how to deal with the grays of right and wrong.

Freddie

Jason's first run-in with the law was when he was thirteen years old.

He's nineteen now. Watching his lifeless, shredded form- the first time in four years I've seen my oldest son- propped upon a silver gurney, too clean for death; all I can think is I should've been there more.

I should've fought Esmy harder to see him. Should've backhanded him as many times as I needed to set the boy straight. I should've done all this and more. In the end, it might have made a difference.

This was two years before Esmy kicked me out of the house the last time. Blues brought him home. Shoplifting. I beat the boy with my belt and he cried and God as my witness, I hated every second of it. He was too much for his mother and teachers and Lord, just about anyone else who crossed paths with him.

Don't even matter who killed him.

Boy would have just ended up dead anyway.

"He yours?" a voice says from beyond my bubble of bereavement. I look to see a short, balding man with bifocals and reminders of lunch staining the shirt below his white coat. He stands in the doorway, glasses on the end of his nose, crown of remaining hair on end.

"Yeah," I say.

"Got the call an hour ago, but there was an incident that required all hands on deck. Sorry to keep you waiting. Have you been here long? Franklin Bean, but you can call me Frank." He extends his hand to shake mine, but I look down at it with crossed arms.

He withdraws it. "Okay. Well, it's my job to prepare your kid to go to a funeral home, but because it's a shooting, we gotta deal with law enforcement first. So, there's forms and questions and all kinds of formality. It's gonna be a process, but we'll let the sheriff's office deal with those shenanigans."

"Shenanigans," I say, "That what this is to you? There are two

dead boys on these tables, here. I don't know enough about the fat one, but this one right here? This is my blood. So I would appreciate if you didn't refer to his murder investigation as fucking shenanigans!"

Bean pouts. "I'm sorry. Did not mean to make light of it, sir. Sorry for your loss."

"Now, what's this incident?" I ask, not really caring. I need a distraction. Anything to get the image of Esmy out of my head when she learns the boy is dead. "Anything to do with the riots?"

He approaches the gurney's other side, hands in pockets, the corpse of my son all that divides us.

"Oh, nothing to worry about. Woman who came in with burns bit the ear off an orderly and escaped. Apparently, she woke in a panic, screaming something fierce. What she said is just a matter of rumor."

"Someone had a bad night."

"Honestly, for all intents and purposes, she wasn't supposed to make it. But what do I know? I just work here."

"Are all morticians this fuckin' weird?"

"I'm no mortician, friend," Bean says. "I'm the coroner. I don't even have a degree. Someone I know gave me a fancy job because the fuckhead is married to my sister, and I'm the troll she feels sorry for. I know enough to determine cause of death. Hmm. Looks like a gunshot! Ding ding ding! Got any other smart-Alec remarks, or can I do my job?"

His anger is nasal, like his voice, a lifetime of bitterness in both.

"I'm sorry. I am very upset at the moment," I tell him, "Could you give me a moment longer with him?"

Bean nods. "Of course," he says, and waddles through the doorway, out of sight, allowing me to return to the pit in my stomach, and the words I will say when I call the boy's mother.

Jason.

I'm sorry.

Peter

Viktor seems different, even now. As I join him, among a new group of faces I hardly recognize—*hey, there's Walter, walking with a slight limp after Syd beat the shit out of him*—in the old Lord Street warehouse, he is manic. He paces. He growls.

There is no Barney. No Larry. No Syd. They're all dead or incapacitated. There are new strangers, with new perceptions and new motivations to camouflage into.

I stood out before, because I was the most afraid. Now, I have to be one of them. I can't act like the turncoat I am, knowing most of these people will be dead or arrested in little more than a day.

Rupert and I have our plan. It's not bulletproofed, but the risk is greater to me than him. He can sit in his comfortable chair, in his comfortable house and never step foot outside his comfortable existence.

I told him to verbally agree to whatever Viktor asks of him and let me handle the rest. He didn't flinch as he agreed or show concern for my safety whatsoever.

I'm not doing it for Rupert Smith, though.

"This has gone to shit," Viktor mutters, still pacing. "Absolute *fucking shit!"* He swings his open hand at the nearest folding table, flinging a laptop and several pieces of equipment away at breakneck velocity.

Walter decides this is the time to step into the spotlight, making his opinion known.

"But Viktor, isn't this what we wanted?"

Don't do it, buddy.

"I mean, look at the news!" Walter exclaims. "We are *kings*, Quinn. Congress is in panic. The Justice Department won't manage to separate their heads from their asses for weeks! Weeks!"

He sounds almost giddy; despite the pain he's clearly ignoring.

"Who cares if we have a couple setbacks?" Walter squawks, and it doesn't take a rocket scientist to know those will be his last words.

On cue, Viktor pulls his revolver from the back of his pants.

Seconds later, Walter is bleeding out on the concrete floor, much like Barney did.

So much for a friendly face around here.

"Now," Viktor says, "If nobody has anything to add, we have a lot of work to do, gentlemen."

"Want me to get rid of him, boss?" one of Vic's goons ask.

"Nah," Viktor says, waving his revolver in the air, "The matching blood stains really liven the place up. Fuck him. Some people really don't know when to shut the fuck up." He tucks the gun away, replacing it with a cigarette he can wave around. "So? Anyone else have a smart-ass-fucking remark, or can we get on with business?"

"I have something to add," a voice from behind us says. All eyes do a one-eighty to see a sight from beyond the grave.

Sydney. Half her face is obscured by a gauze bandage. Patches of her blonde hair are singed, others completely burned away. She descends steps from the red metal door, each intentional movement on her left side spawning three involuntary ones as her broken body pushes forward, biological consequences be damned.

Viktor's jaw hangs before contorting upward into a pained smile, brow pushing down over his eyes. He looks like a snake unhinging his mouth to accommodate a meal.

"Jesus Christ, Syd."

"What?" she spits, dragging her uncooperative foot forward alongside the functional one. "Thought I was dead?"

"I had no idea."

"Not even...a *fucking*...phone call! Not the .... *slightest*...attempt....to find me! Here... here you are, still doing what you...do."

She stops beside him. They face each other, in front of forty-some eyes and a corpse off to the right of us. Her scowl is wider than it was, fire carved across it. His expression is more the shellshock I would expect of her, because she is the Devil now Viktor pretended to be, and a devil only knows rage.

"Tell me...tell me you didn't mean for this to happen, Viktor. Tell me...tell me you didn't know this would...fucking happen!"

Viktor says he had no idea. I know it's a lie. Sydney knows it's a lie. He is caught red-handed, unaware all his credibility is gone.

"I... *believed you*," she pants through the pain. "I defended...you."

"Syd, you have to listen to me," Viktor protests.

“No,” she says, “I have…listened…enough. Listened. Obeyed. Like…*your dog.* No more, Viktor. I was…*beautiful.* I could…. have had anyone. But you made me…*this*…*this* thing.”

“Sydney,” Viktor says, raising his hand to the bandaged side of her face. She winces. “How could I have known?”

“I loved you,” she says, “I would have died for you. But I didn’t die. I just came back. Syd Mayhew is…dead. And all I know is… *mayhem.*”

“Syd Mayhem.” Viktor smiles, looking deep into her soul, hand still hovering over the gauze. “I like it.”

She closes her good eye, and I imagine the one destroyed beneath protective cotton closes too, as she looks down and away from where I’m standing. The scowl is still in full view.

“You won’t,” she says.

Viktor’s expression changes, the condescending grin falling from his face like a fountain. The pool of despair it lands within spreads across his face.

“What does that mean, Sydney?” he asks.

Seems I’m not the only turncoat in the room.

She leans up on her toes, trying to cover the distance between her five feet and his six, and whispers in his ear.

The pool spreads like a flood into levees breaking across Viktor’s facial muscles. I know the effect her hot words can have on the hairs of the inner ear. Her feet fall flat, and she turns her back on him, pushing through us towards the metal door in back.

“What did she say, boss?”

Viktor’s face might as well be the ghosts I’ve been seeing everywhere. As Syd disappears through the door into the warm July night, his face contorts and contracts until it is nearly shriveled.

“We have to kill her,” he says, looking to me. “Peter, time to finish what you started.”

Now all eyes are on me.

“No, Viktor. I’m not going to do that.”

For the first time, I may have incurred Viktor Quinn’s true wrath. Sure, he has pointed the barrel of his gun into my back, haplessly murdered multiple people in front of my eyes, and made me fear for my life in general, but this is different.

I am no killer.

“The fuck did you say?” Viktor shouts, “Tell me you did not just refuse me, right after that bitch did! Oh Peter, my friend; my poor,

unfortunate friend. Tell me you are not foolish enough to deny me this...this favor."

"Not really a favor with a gun to my head, Vic."

I have signed my death warrant, just like Barney and Walter did. I know it as he nods his head at the men behind me. I know it as they grab my arms, pull me, kicking and screaming through the red metal door.

I know it as they force me to my knees just beyond it, Vic bringing up the rear, revolver back in his hand. Armed with all his resentment toward Sydney, Rupert Smith and the world in general. Ready to bury a bullet in my brain.

"This won't change anything, Viktor!"

"Maybe not," he says, "but it will feel lighter with one less problem, won't it?"

"Fine," I say, trying to stop my chest from tightening or my bladder from emptying on the ground in front of my killer, "Kill me! But Sydney will still fuck up any chance remaining of pulling this thing off!"

Viktor scoffs. "You don't even believe in the thing. You never did." He kneels in front me, limp wrist grasping the gun hanging over his knee. "You're just like all the other scared people out here, Pete. You could have been a force to be reckoned with. You could have been a fucking trailblazer, but here you are. Chained to your conscience like it's some woman and you're pussy whipped."

He slams the space between his thumb and fingers into my throat, digging their tips into the side of my neck. I gasp for air, clawing with my tongue and tonsils to overcompensate for my blocked airway. My own hands dig into Viktor's arm as the fist tightens.

"No woman in this world is worth it, friend. Especially not the bitch in your head, telling you what's right and wrong. I had a mother, too. Know what happened to her?"

He relaxes his grip slightly, but oxygen comes no easier for it.

"She loved a man who destroyed her will to live. She gave him everything. Gave *me* everything. But he taught me she was weak, and Harry was right. Woman died of a broken heart like some injured fucking bird. If that's freedom, kill me now."

He releases his grip around my neck. My chest seizes and my lungs gasp for air and my head hugs the ground, as if its quality is better down here. Trying to cough the outlines of his fingers in my

flesh away, I push myself back to a kneel.

"You're the one with the gun, Viktor. Might be high time to start turning it on yourself."

Viktor forces my chin upward, using two fingers and a thumb to make me look him in the eyes.

"You have been a good friend to me, Peter. I don't want to have to do this. So, I'll accept you're struggling with this. I love Sydney, too."

I scoff. "You think this is about Sydney, you fucking coward? I'm not you, Viktor. I don't get off on killing people."

Without warning, he smacks me across the face with the revolver handle. I hear teeth break, taste the shards, lick the blood and stifle a scream. My entire upper body absorbs the blow because my face and neck cannot do it alone.

"But I don't need to kill you, Peter," he says, ignoring my throbbing posture. "I just need to make you understand, there are worse things that could happen here."

Hand cradling my shattered jaw, waiting for agony to subside, I spit at the ground, unleashing a thick stream of blood spatter on the tarmac between us. In the middle of the dark red pool is part of a lower molar.

The other piece scrapes the bottom of my tongue as my mouth is acquainted with its new shape.

"It doesn't matter," he says, "Soon this will be over." He nods at one of the men standing behind me, charged with keeping a rear exit obstructed.

I don't see him, or the other gun that smacks the top of my skull, pivoting me into pavement, pieces of my brain through the windshield of waking thought, and the rest into abject darkness.

Nathan

Life is kind of like Minesweeper.

I'm not really sure how it works, but I know if you keep clicking squares, you win or you lose. Most of the blocks are losing blocks, and I can never steer the mines in the proper direction.

It happened with my Dad.

It happened with Chester and his gang of jerks.

I can't even imagine what Nadia would make of my Minesweeper metaphor. From what she's told me of escaping Syria, all the blocks must seem like landmines themselves.

Reunited with her on my front lawn, she stares off into the distance.

"So, was it worth it?" she asks. There is a shade of annoyance I don't quite understand.

"Not really," I admit, and her shoulders relax. "I mean, I didn't even see Chris or Chester there. Or Doug. Did you?"

She shakes her head.

"Makes you wonder if they planned to go there at all, doesn't it?" She smiles, placing her hand on mine. It is the first time a girl my age has ever touched me. "We actually walked into the fire."

"And they chickened out," I grin.

"Feels good, doesn't it?"

I nod.

"Then it was worth it, after all." After a pause in which she retracts her hand, she asks what I remember.

It comes in flashes. A man with fire in his eyes, screaming words into a megaphone at more men holding torches. Chanting and cheering as the man with the loudest voice egged them on. They were angry, and he knew what they all wanted to hear.

"I remember thinking it felt wrong. Wrong to be there. They were talking about...immigration and founding class, all that sort of stuff."

"They quoted something too. Do you remember it?"

I squint, trying to remember the words she wants to hear, but fail. Knowing the quote, Nadia repeats it.

"'But now, the little crazy children are jangling the keys of the kingdom, and common vengeance writes the law.' That's Arthur Miller. *The Crucible*."

"How do you know that?"

"Life was bleak after the war. My only solace was in books. I picked up every one that I could find before I came here. And now that I *am* here, it's the only thing that reminds me of home.

"There were protests like that all the time in Syria. Most of them ended with the army rolling in and opening fire or just bombing the district causing trouble. And we were privileged. But privileges mean little after being taken away."

"I'm sorry," I say, brushing my hair out of my face, unsure as ever how to respond to her war stories. I could never compare to what she's been through. I expect her to lower her head and smile, perhaps just at the gratitude of life, like she always does.

Instead, she leans forward and kisses me. It is brief and no more than a lip-lock, but no girl has ever done so. I don't pull away, despite my shock, but return the kiss.

"Nadia!"

We are both jolted by Nadia's uncle, Farhad. She looks to me in panic, then back at him.

"Have you not caused enough trouble tonight?"

Nadia stands, her back to me.

"I am sorry, Uncle."

Farhad relaxes, chuckling. "And what are you sorry for, child? I am not going to say anything, you know."

The guy has a strange sense of humor.

Nadia bows her head, relaxing. "Thank you, Uncle. You are too generous."

"However," he continues, "it is very late. Almost four in the morning, in fact. I believe we could all benefit from some rest."

Life is like a game of Minesweeper, but maybe there's a glimmer of victory under all this bullshit. I still don't really understand that stupid game, but as a car screeches into the gated community I've lived inside my entire life; turning the corner at the end of the lane where our houses sit, side by side, the metaphor almost makes perfect sense in my exhausted brain.

As three bullets fly out the passenger window and the car whines to a sudden halt, both the metaphor and my sense of safety are shattered within a second. Much like Farhad as he collapses in

his driveway, chest riddled with two of the stray rounds.

I don't see where the third bullet goes.

The monster who emerges from the driver's side storms toward us, grabbing Nadia by the arm, is something out of a bad dream. There is no perfect description for the thing that proves all my childhood fears correct.

I feel immobilized by fear as it drags Nadia away. She calls my name, but I am paralyzed by the sight of a dead man so close to my domain. His eyes stare back at me, unlike any character I've ever gunned down in a video game. They are lifeless, caught between shock and agony, neck hanging limp over an outstretched arm.

Nathan! She cries but beyond my sinking brow, I am unable to call her name.

Nathan!

The cries become more distant, drowned out by the return of screeching wheels and once they are gone like the wind, so too are Nadia's screams, and a woman's voice yelling at her to be quiet.

Nathan!

I should never have gone to that rally.

Samantha

I am jolted awake by the gunshots that pierce the quiet. At first, I think the popping sounds are echoes of a dream I don't remember. That's before I hear the girl.

Screaming. My son's name is carried on the syllables of her shrieks.

Yukalaylee dives over the side of the bed and underneath, his thighs too fat to accommodate the narrow space between a metal frame and the floor.

I ignore his panic and throw the covers back, leaping out of bed. The girl screams Nathan's name again as I reach the bedroom window. The angle obscures my view; all I can see are the headlights of a car next door, the corner of my lawn and the houses across the street.

My legs carry me down three flights of stairs and out the door onto my lawn. My pounding heart holds my exhausted eyes open, despite their every compulsion to be sewn shut at the lids.

Leaving the front door wide open, I find my kid on his hands and knees, hyperventilating at the patches of dirt and dead grass as if it will console him. The rear lights of the car darken as it speeds away, screeching as it turns the corner at street's end.

"**Nathan**?"

He says nothing, continuing to inaudibly sob, long bangs hanging off the front of his skull, dangling over the ground. I reach him, collapsing to my knees and taking him in both arms, rocking him back and forth.

"What happened?"

And then I see it. The motionless body of my neighbor, his eyes wide, pointed toward me in a stare I will never forget. His white collared shirt is decorated in a puddle of red that starts in his abdomen and grows in circumference. His feet are pointed at the sky and another hole in his forehead, smaller than a dime, carves a tunnel through the top of his head where the brain it housed escapes.

Opposite his driveway is Iza, her hair hidden by cloth and

unshakeable belief in her husband's religious customs, screaming. Nadia's mother calls Farhad's name before rushing to his body as sirens wail in the distance, barreling towards us.

One by one, the lights in my neighbors' houses turn on. Heads stick out, then recoil in horror as they realized what has happened, just as I did. One by one, wives send out their husbands to get the dirt as they supervise from above. Cynthia Harris, my neighbor to the right, emerges herself because she's a miserable widow and I can't wait until the hag keels over.

Stacy, whose husband is understandably away on a business trip, also represents the Thompsons from the curb by her repaired flowerbed.

Let them judge. They won't be paying the therapy bills for years to come.

I continue to cradle Nathan, closing my eyes to avoid the stare of a hundred others. Listening to the creeping volume of police cruisers and ambulances, hoping the dead man is not watching me, too.

When I open them again, he is, and the sounds of help on the way are replaced in my brain with the sound of Nadia's screams that are no longer there.

Peter

It only takes a moment to make peace with your lot in life. I finally realize what Viktor said about finding your purpose is absolutely true.

Waking upon the pavement where my face was broken, I looked upon the pool of blood leaking from my mouth.

I spent a moment wondering if I was now an amnesiac, but that would be too generous for my mess of a life. The last forty-eight hours have given me no reason to suspect I can defeat Viktor and walk away.

The point of impact from his revolver has swollen. It radiates outwards in varying degrees of busted blood vessels and excruciating pain, which makes my gums throb and broken teeth quake. One cheek feels heavier than the other, and my tongue is not sure which side is more comfortable.

Searching the warehouse, I found it abandoned. The folding tables emptied of computers, all military equipment cleared out. Not a map hanging from the wall or paper trail left. Only signs anyone was ever there was the hanging stench of testosterone and matching bloodstains adorning the concrete.

Even Walter's corpse was gone.

So I decided to take a moment to make peace with the world and this God-forsaken town, its glass vomit in the street and the characters who have shaped its misfortune. I climbed in my car, surprised to find it intact, with naught a broken window.

I turned the ignition and put it in drive, wishing Viktor's death would put me at peace. It almost would, for all the destruction left in his widespread wake.

It would almost be enough, but there's one more thing I have to do.

THE REDBRICK HOUSE is not far from the warehouse. It sits on a corner between the Boulevard and the entrance to a winding maze of gated communities and cookie-cutter homes. I know it, because

I've driven by it a hundred times in the last two years, even when I didn't mean to. I have cast a glare at its decorated windows and dual cars in the driveway, even against the strongest urges not to.

She drives an Audi now.

This is the first time I have ever stopped in front of it, just beyond the curb where she drags her garbage cans every Monday night for collection the following morning, or where visitors park when they come over for a dinner party.

Exiting my driver's seat, where I sat as she stared me dead in the eyes and told me she didn't love me anymore, while I smoked a cigarette and simply accepted her resignation as my own, I feel wrong being here.

Like Tom Sawyer at his own funeral.

My heart pounds like my mangled mouth, both in my throat like insects.

I climb the walkway, stopping in front of a rounded white door with matching diagonal windows, and draw breath as my finger rings their bell.

A man in pajama bottoms and bare feet opens the door moments later. His eyes are full of grogginess and hostility, outlines of a couch embedded in his chest.

Seems not all is well in paradise.

"You better have a good reason for waking me up, buddy. It's four-thirty in the fucking morning. Don't tell me you're selling something or I'm getting my rifle." He squints at me, surveying the ragged cloth my features have become. "What happened to you?"

"I'm here to see Angie, actually."

"In the middle of the goddamned night?"

"I'm an old friend, and it's extremely important, or I wouldn't be here, pal."

A light in the hallway turns on behind him, and a woman's voice calls out.

"Chase? Honey, who is it?"

He turns his head inside the door, the voices muffled. A second later, the crack of light in the doorway widens, a face I know so well before me for the first time in almost two years.

"Peter?"

"Hi, Angie."

"Peter?" Chase says, "As in your ex-boyfriend. That Peter?" He looks from her to me. "Is that you?"

I nod. The ass-kicking of a lifetime would be anticipated if it hadn't already happened. There is nothing Chase could do worse than Viktor has done, but he doesn't offer to match it, rolling his eyes and returning to my field of obscurity, switching off the light behind him.

Angie steps out, tucking her robe closed tighter and closing the door so we are alone on the front step.

"What the fuck, Pete?"

"Angie," I say, "I would not have come here unless it was extremely fucking important, so shut your mouth a second and listen."

Her jaw drops. "Excuse me?"

"Put aside your pride a second, woman! Because after tonight, I may well be six feet under, and I won't get another chance to say this."

"What are you talking about, Peter?"

I shake my head. "It doesn't matter, Angie. Please? Just listen, and then you will never have to hear my voice again."

She falls silent with a sharp inhale.

"And I don't care that you left me because there was someone else. He looks and sounds like a fucking tool, but thank God, I don't have to live with it.

"I am not here for you. I am here for me, because in finding the fucking line again, I lost any concern for myself. I just needed to remind myself there is still someone out there worth fighting for."

Angie jumps on the pause in my trainwreck of thought.

"What happened to your face?"

I shake my head. "None of that matters, Angie."

"Of course it matters, if you're in trouble."

I don't need her false concern, or her charity. I don't need to know her ever after will be a happy one; which, if the couch outlines and rampant jealousy in Chase's face and posture are accurate, is questionable.

"I just needed to see you one more time, to remind myself that for all the horrible things in this...evil, fucked-up world, that I once believed something good can come of it."

"Why are you talking like something is going to happen to you?"

I shrug. "What does it matter, Angie? I wasn't a thought before right now at...almost 5 o'clock in the morning. And it took me knocking on your door, at this ungodly fucking hour, to cross your

mind. And it's fine. You clearly have what you want now."

"Peter," she says, "It's not like that."

"You know what?" I reply, "I don't want to hear what it's like. I don't love you anymore, and you don't love me. That's life, baby. But seeing as you're the only person I ever did love, I'm just trying to remember what it's like."

Angie looks at her feet, hint of a smile.

"And how does it look from where you're standing?"

Her words always did take the wind out of me. I relax, like reaching the end of a plank to find peace in oblivion, just before stepping into a liquid grave.

"It looks like Hell," I tell her, "but it feels beautiful."

"Oh, thanks," she says, "Still an ace with the compliments, aren't you?"

I smile at her. It hurts my broken teeth and swollen lips and battered pride, and the muscles convulse at the contortion of my bruised cheek.

"Always."

"Seriously. What happened to you?"

I put my hands in pockets, ignoring the screaming flesh of my raw one, tapping my feet nervously.

"You would not believe a word."

"Try me."

"Tell you what," I say, "it would put Gymbo in there to shame."

Angie gasps, but her brows don't sink.

"Don't be a jerk," she replies, "He's a good guy."

"I'm sure he is. I'm happy for you. All I can ask is that you never take it for granted. You and I, we had what we had, but this? House, two cars? This is the real fucking thing."

I begin to back away.

"Don't blow this, Angie."

She calls my name but once my back is turned, I don't respond, walking down to my car and climbing in the driver's side, perched upon finely paved road that's nothing like the alley of potholes near the Boulevard. I don't respond to a word she says, barely hearing them at all.

It only takes one moment.

Sydney

The night is long, each inch swallowed up by the miles to come.

Yellow lines in the road guide my car between the intersections. They would guide my inner narrator between the frenzy of thoughts, but that voice is dead like the skin where my cheeks used to be. They hurt, and so does the silence, deafening like the explosion which inspired it.

I still feel the flame's embrace, the way its fingers caressed me, leaving a lifetime of rot from a moment's touch. The bandage sags over it, begging to be changed.

Flesh beneath it screams, but the sound is muffled, thrashing against the side of my face.

The girl beside me is quiet. Angry. Staring into that long night, the one that consumes us both. I don't blame her for her vacant presence, only for the fear she does not feel.

"You know," I say, "I used to be beautiful like you."

The houses blur by me. They all look the same. The lights perched above the endless streets, they hurt my eyes. Tighten my chest. Each time I draw air, there's a pain alternating between different ribs.

Part of me is dying, somewhere.

I just hope it's not my anger.

The girl says nothing.

"God fucking dammit, I was beautiful," I muse, "So beautiful. Men old enough to be my father. Men who were just fucking boys masquerading. Men who were my father."

The words are weightless now.

"I'm sure you've been raped by now. Young girl, dysfunctional family. Pretty. Not to mention your home country. Haven't you?" Her shoulders tense in the seat beside me. "You can tell me. I've been raped so many times, I've lost count. I was a stupid little cunt, too. Believed too many men, too many times.

"I bet you know something about that, huh?"

The girl's silence is heavy. It has a way of pushing my foot down on the gas pedal, driving my heart rate higher on the speedometer,

as suburbia becomes the Strip, and porch lamps become marquees in storefront windows.

"Come on, we don't need to exchange life stories or anything, but where you come from? I can't even imagine. Even worse, I don't really want to. All I ever cared about was.... well, fucking nothing. But now..."

"Now you care," she says, still staring out the window.

"What?"

"Now you care," she repeats, slowly turning her gaze to me. No longer sure I want her to look at me, I look into the long night. "Now you have lost something, and now you care. I was like that too." I can feel her tears like they are falling onto me. Christ, the burn wants them. Screams for them. "Bullets and bombs change everything."

"Fire, honey. Try to keep up."

"Fire is the worst of them. Bullets are quick. Bombs even more so. Fire is slow," she says.

"Thanks for the lesson, scarf head."

"I don't wear a scarf, which is called a niqab. It is a symbol of oppression. We aren't even Muslim. Christians is what we are. We became Muslims to escape Syria. We became Muslim to blend in. We became fake instead of dying like we deserved."

"I should introduce you to my Daddy then," I smirk, "Watched that man murder two illegals once. I was eleven. Gave the bastards exactly what they deserved."

The memory of my father, tall and built like a goddamned lumberjack, with his red mane and luscious beard, brings a smile to my face.

An old injury in my arm distracts me from the burn.

"Caught them trespassing, gave them to the count of three. Killed them on one. Their backs had just turned," I tell her. "That night was the last time I recall feeling bad for one of you poor fucks. For anyone, really.

"We buried them behind the barn. The other side, away from my momma. Nobody came looking for them. Nobody asked questions. Might have been here illegally-"

"How did your mother die?" she asks, suddenly as any question she could have asked, and it would not have dug claws quite so deep.

"What?"

“It’s pardon, I believe. And your mother. How did she die?”

“Don’t be a little shit. Correcting me? Gunshot. Some dude my Daddy owed money to. Came to collect, but piece of shit was drunk. Him and my Daddy both were, but the piece of shit had a gun.”

The pit in my stomach is hotter than my cheek. No bandage for it. No aloe vera. No justice, either.

“Momma took a bullet for us.”

“She jumped in front?”

A tear falls from the wrong fucking side of my face. I’m not even sure my right eye has tear ducts any longer.

“I don’t want to talk about this shit!” I yell, pounding the compartment between us. In doing so, the car swerves towards the side of the road, then back as I yank the wheel right. When it straightens out, and we are back, confined to the yellow lines, I wait for the girl to exhibit even an ounce of fear.

“All I want to do, is make Viktor pay for making me.... this fucking way!”

There is none.

“My mother died, too,” she says.

“What?”

“It’s pardon.”

“What the fuck, kid? What is your endgame here? Think we’re going to trade war stories? This isn’t how.... *that* works!”

I am a phoenix from the ashes, my face tells me, and rebirth is a painful fucking process.

“Iza is my father’s second wife. He married her after my mother died.”

“What the fuck does that have to do with anything?” I ask her.

“En route to America. Farhad thought it would make us seem more legitimate. He swore me to secrecy, told me to say Iza was my mother. And he loved my mother, Farhad, he did. Way more than my father ever could.”

“That old man in the wheelchair? He’s your Daddy, right?”

The girl scoffs.

“Back home, people knew who we were. Omar, my father, was a lieutenant in the Royal army. Farhad was the watchmaker, a pauper. No wife. No children of his own. No friends in the world. But he was my friend.

“One day, they sent Omar to watch over the protests. Make sure nothing would happen, that nobody would get out of line. But some

of the protesters turned violent, and my father had to shoot them.

"I remember the day it happened; we didn't see Omar for a few days. My mother grew worried. He was a good man, but prone to disappearing.

"Farhad's business was in the one of the first neighborhoods bombed. In Homs. My father made sure he joined us, and then continued his duty."

"Killing protesters?" I ask.

"Yes," the girl says, "He always drank, but now more. Time went on. The war got worse. I don't remember exactly when I became aware it was more than protests, that we were at war with our countrymen. That it was *even* war."

Her voice, confident until now, wavers and cracks.

"Omar and Farhad fought constantly, and my father wanted to throw Farhad out. Said he wasn't loyal to the government. But he just...hated the killing, the senselessness of it. He just wanted it to stop. My father was angry, just...all the time. Started beating my mother, having an affair. Drinking more.

"One night, he asked me to come to his room. And.... *that* happened." She grimaces, and I'm lost between the lights outside my window and the fucking inferno in her eyes, and the bared teeth of her underbite. "I could hear the bombs. I held onto every burst of gunfire in the distance, and just when I thought I couldn't push it any farther from my mind, the....*violation* of it," her broken from says, staring into her hands, slouched in the seat, "my father's body went limp over me."

"Bastard got what we deserved, yeah?"

She nods, in anything but the shallow pool water of agreement.

"Farhad had struck him with a fire poker."

"Holy shit," I say. Was not expecting that.

My face hurts less, but the long night barrels by.

"It did not kill him. Farhad knew we had to get him out of the palace. He told me to collect my mother, and he would meet us later, near the entrance to the city sewers where my parents told us to never go.

"My brother Reza was also in the Army but was out on assignment. He was nineteen. I don't know if he is dead or alive," she says, "but I miss him. He wanted to be my father in every way. And he was."

The pain recedes further.

I feel almost nothing.

“So why did you bring your father with you?” I ask, “if he did all this?”

The girl shrugs, finally propping herself up in the passenger seat, wiping her own tears away.

“Farhad could not leave him. My mother did not escape the palace, but that horrible man did. I would not have gotten out of the palace if she did not distract the Guard so that I could get to the sewer.”

The burn is numb.

“It’s always the worst ones who survive, kiddo,” I reply. No better consolation exists, as much as I want to give it. “My Daddy lived ten years after my momma. And she was the better behaved of ‘em.”

“How long you’ll live, I wonder,” she says vacantly, turning her head back toward the long night. I’m not sure which of us will see dawn first.

“Wha-pardon?” I ask, catching myself.

“You killed the only man I ever loved.”

“The only man?”

“Farhad. The one you shot on my doorstep. Who you left to die, when you shoved me into your car, for whatever purpose you had. I guess it does not matter now, does it? Farhad is dead, my mother is dead, and nothing else matters to me in this world now. I have had everything taken, and have nothing left to give you, except maybe my life.

“Take it, for it means nothing to me now.”

Pain returns.

Full force.

Peter

After leaving Angie's, I have one thread to find Syd. I don't know where Viktor himself has disappeared to, and don't have the time to track him. Sydney is a different story, though.

She's angry, but what does she want?

To ruin Viktor.

This is Syd.

Whether he used her or not, *that* he used her is the perception. He put the person he was supposed to protect above all else in the line of danger, and she paid for it.

A very special girl.

She knows part of the plan. She must know. Mentally backtracking across a backdrop of newborn streaks of orange as the sun rises over the Boulevard, I try to piece together what I know.

The warehouse on Lord Street.

Dead end.

Viktor and Syd's apartment. Another dead end. Viktor is not foolish enough to make his home a place of operations.

Anawi.

The watchmaker.

I was supposed to deliver him a message which turned out to be for me. The only thing prevented that was the Wallace kid.

The mother.

She spoke to me in the hospital. She told me her friend was attacked as well, and she was sorry for my loss.

Thanked me for saving her son from those kids.

The mother must know something about Anawi.

It seems like a better plan than just waltzing up to the guy's house.

"So," Viktor says, reappearing in my rearview mirror, "You waltz up to her house instead. Brilliant *fucking* plan."

He lights a cigarette in his palm, still wearing the same subconscious clothes from earlier. This is the version of Viktor that no longer exists. Brash, but not a cold-blooded killer. Confident, charming, a wolf in sheep's clothing; but not a monster like he's

become.

"And then what?" Viktor asks as I try to keep my eyes ahead. "You think Syd is stupid enough to tell Anawi the plan? Girl doesn't even know the plan."

She knows parts of it, though.

"You wouldn't go to all the trouble of learning about Anawi so to use him as a red herring on *me*. He figures into this, somehow."

"Peter," Viktor says, "Who says I did? For all you know, I could have been bluffing, you nitwit." He takes a long drag, blowing smoke rings into the front seat.

"Except you weren't. Syd was awfully detailed about this guy. She knew the house, right down to its finest details. And Viktor Quinn doesn't miss details, does he?"

Viktor pouts. "You're right. I'm pretty fucking great, aren't I?"

All the pieces are coming together, Viktor.

Better step up your game.

THE QUAINT NEIGHBORHOOD I stopped a lone kid from having the piss taken out of him is not the peaceful atmosphere I envisioned returning to. For all its houses that alter trim colors like Christmas lights but mostly remain identical, the macabre scene I stumble upon is all the more surprising.

Two cop cars, sirens flashing but muted, block the street in front of Anawi's house. Families to the left and right are awake, spectators to this sunrise murder scene. Uniformed officers guard a cordon around the lawn where the grass is flattened in the distinct shape of a human body. All that's left of them is blood that stains the earth.

I don't turn the corner, shifting the car into park instead. Nothing like pulling up to a murder scene you don't belong to.

A leg reaches over the center console, followed by another as Viktor squeezes himself into the passenger seat. He settles in beside me with a groan; a regular occurrence, due to an old injury in his lower back.

Jesus, even his medical conditions are following me.

"Wonder who she killed now," he says, lighting another cigarette. Its fumes are inescapable, yet imaginary. My suffocation is anxiety, and still the chemical maelstrom between Viktor's fingers, billowing upward makes me want to gag.

“You’re not mad? About this?”

“Oh,” Viktor replies, “Real me is pissed. Real me is probably gunning for her, and personally now. Wouldn’t be surprised if we kill each other, finally.”

“Where would the romance be in that?” I muse aloud.

“You always were a motherfucker, York.”

“Jokes aside,” I say, watching the cops over my steering wheel, “I don’t know what killing Rupert Smith will bring you. All this chaos. All these lives ruined just so you could extinguish one.”

The cigarettes are appearing faster now, burning through quicker. If the real Viktor Quinn folds this fast, I may make it out alive.

“All I did was prove a point.”

“And what point was that?”

Another cigarette, another flare of his nostrils. Another cloud of smoke.

“All men are sheep, Peter. Give them a taste of self-righteousness and the tools to rebel, they will fight alongside you until their dying day.”

“When you murder them,” I finish.

“Semantics, Peter. Whether I kill them, they kill themselves or someone does the job for me, everyone is a means to an end.”

“Yeah, well,” I tell him, “I’m not your errand boy anymore, Viktor. Goodbye.”

My eyes are burning. I haven’t slept in twenty-six hours. Pieces of my brain are swimming away from the rest of it. Throbbing in my face fights the heaviness in my eyes and arms to stay awake, push forward.

Even if I die from exhaustion, I think, knocking on the door to Nathan Wallace’s house, I’m finding Syd.

When it opens, and I stand face to face with the woman who thanked me for saving her son, and the cat at her side, it’s the first time I have seen such bewilderment in another person that matches my own.

Unlike Angie, this woman does not see how broken I am. Her eyes are fixated on my own, not on the systemic shades of purple the skin around them has become.

After her initial shock subsides, she speaks.

“Your name is Peter, isn’t it?”

Samantha

Destiny is a bleak affair.

One minute you're the neighborhood laughing stock, whom the wives down the way disparage and their children mock. One minute, you are rock bottom personified, holding hands with someone else bottoming out.

I haven't heard from Freddie, but he doesn't need to hear from me, either. My heart sinks for a mother who has lost her son, and a father who also lost his chance at reconciling.

I am no good to him now.

Instead, I sit at the kitchen table, tucked away in a corner no one would pay attention to. Instead, I scroll through Facebook for what may be the first time in months. Trying to see how many of these people I give a damn about. Trying to distract myself from the dead body on the lawn dividing my house from the neighbor's.

Penny Jones is getting a divorce, and she's not keeping the fucking yacht.

My sister Stephanie, ranting at three in the morning about how depressing her life is. Laura, on a moral crusade against GMOs and vaccines in kids. She always was inefficient.

From there, I scroll through the lives of acquaintances and strangers, who left sympathetic comments in my feed I never read. I click their photos and see picture-perfect lives which are probably Hell behind the scenes. I read their status updates, pointless little windows into lives I'll never be part of. I move from one to the next because I just want to forget the dead man in my daydreams.

There's a knock at the door. Yukalaylee, disrupted from his slumber, must think there's a delivery for him, because he trots out of the kitchen and down the stairs. I follow him, certain it's an officer, come to follow up with Nathan. He's sleeping right now, I'll tell him. The kid's had a long night.

Hopefully, there's a lead on Nadia.

Yukalaylee sits beside the door as I approach it, no interest in venturing out, but very invested in who's come to visit.

I turn the handle and expecting to come face to face with one in

a million people- a plainclothes detective, Nadia, one of my batshit crazy siblings, my ex-husband or worse- the person in front of me was never one of them.

His face is swollen, a large welt forming on his lip. The area around his left eye is bruising a heartless shade of purple, but he carries himself higher, seems more resolved.

He opens his mouth to speak, but I beat him to it.

“Your name is Peter, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” he nods, “Did your kid tell you that?”

I point to myself. “Samantha. I think I told you that in the hospital?”

He nods again. Looking to his left, he asks if he can come in. I stand clear of the door, and he steps inside. I apologize for the mess, and the very co-dependent feline. He says it's fine and I beckon him to follow me.

We return to the kitchen table where I sat alone, only moments earlier.

“What brings you to the neighborhood?” I ask, offering him a drink. He asks if I have alcohol. I have gin. He says that works.

“A friend of mine might have come by,” he replies, taking the glass from my hand.

“Was this friend the aggressive type?” I ask, taking a seat across the roundtable from him.

He takes the whole glass in one mouthful. Wincing, he sets it down.

“For the pain,” he says, “and yes. I can see she left quite the footprint.”

“Is this friend actually a friend, or an enemy?”

“Your kid asked me the same thing,” Peter replies, “Truth is, she’s neither. She’s just a woman, spurned by her lover. In her mind, anyway. But she’s vengeful, and she’s violent.”

I lean in, starved for gossip. I’ve been on the outs with Christian super soccer moms for the better part of a year.

“How much do you know about what’s going on?” I ask him.

“I know enough to tell you it’s not going to end well.”

“Will you tell me?”

Peter shrugs.

“That depends.”

“On?”

“Whether you’re willing to help me put a stop to this fucking

insanity," he says, and my heart sinks. "I tried to accept it. I tried to run away from it. But deep down, I can't help it. What's happening is wrong."

I think back to last night. To the pit in my stomach of thought that Nathan could be hurt or worse. To Freddie being beaten within an inch of his life, to the hands that reached for my chest and my crotch; to the satisfaction I felt fighting back.

That crazy lady in the church. Her words come back to me.

The world is yours, now, Samantha. What you choose to do with it is up to you.

I nod. "I'll help you."

With that assurance, Peter tells me his story. And by the end of it, Viktor Quinn and Sydney Mayhew feel like more than just hollow names, but characters in a plot that has gone too far for the wrong reasons.

"These people need to be stopped, Sam," he concludes, just as a buzzing from his phone pushes it across my kitchen table. He checks the caller display, and his face goes white.

He looks up at me.

"It's Sydney."

"What do you think she wants?"

The phone buzzes for a third time.

"I don't know."

"Answer it!"

He flips the phone open. It is old, a model nobody in their right mind uses anymore.

"Peter here," he says into the receiver.

I can't hear the conversation, but from the rise and fall of Peter's brow, and the higher pitch of the person on the opposite end, it doesn't seem a pleasant conversation.

"Okay. I will see you there."

More garbled speech escaping his ear into the room we share.

"Right. Alone."

He hangs up.

"Viktor is going to lure Rupert Smith to the old courthouse and kill him in an explosion. That was the plan," he says aloud, but not particularly to me, "She doesn't know if Viktor knows Farhad is dead, but she's counting on the media to let it slip through the cracks. They're busy everywhere else."

"So what now?" I ask him.

“Viktor planned to frame Farhad for Smith’s murder. I need to call him and remind him not to take the bait. You and I will go see what Sydney wants. We seem to have the same endgame.”

“Putting this guy in the ground?”

Peter shakes his head.

“I won’t kill him. If Sydney wants to, that’s her business. But I’ve made it this far without seriously hurting anyone. I plan to keep it that way.”

As he talks, his fingers dial a number into the cell phone.

“Excuse me. I need to make a phone call.”

There was no fucking way I would have entertained this yesterday morning. But a man I know, spoke with, put down in a way- he’s dead, and there was nothing I could have done to stop it.

I can do something to honor his memory now. I can bring his niece home to her family, or all that she has left of it.

I don’t know if I believe in destiny, per se, but times of crisis have a way of bringing out the worst belief systems in you. So, when the plainclothes detective does come to the door minutes later, to inform me my neighbor’s wife pulled a gun on Omar Anawi and turned it on herself after that, it explains the gunshots I hear waiting for Peter to return.

Suddenly, I am only saving that little girl to bring her home to devastation. And yet, it’s my one shot at redemption.

Destiny is something else, alright.

Peter

It only takes one moment to change the world.

For all the flaws in Viktor Quinn's logic, he is not wrong on that count.

For better or worse, it only takes a single act, noble or heinous, to turn the tide. Oswald shot Kennedy on a limo ride through Dallas. The guy who killed that Archduke in Austria and set off a world war couldn't possibly have known the scope of consequences as he fired that gun that day.

Viktor may have taken a stick of dynamite and thrown it at America's racial debate, but he won't get farther if I have anything to do with it. People like Rupert can deal with the politics- if he's even elected after this circus.

I call Smith, remind him of his part.

"He's already called me," Rupert scoffs over the line, "Wants me to meet at the courthouse. Can you believe that? Where I announced my candidacy, of all places."

"What did you tell him?"

"That I would call my driver and be there in an hour. He tried to press for sooner. Just so you know, he sounds hopped up on something. He may have finally snapped."

That happened a long time ago.

"Good," I retort, "That will make him more careless." It can make him more dangerous as well, but I omit that part. "Time to skedaddle, Smith. Get out of town. Leave your house, take your wife, and get somewhere safe. Never know if Viktor will send one of his goons to kill you both."

"I'm not leaving my home, son. It's a waste of time to even argue this. Time neither of us have."

"Fine," I reply, "You do you. But I can't guarantee your family's safety."

"Noted," Smith says, "Maria and I will be fine."

I did what I could.

"It's been a pleasure, Governor."

I almost end the call when I hear him tell me to wait.

“Be careful, Peter. Viktor is not above putting a bullet in you before you even walk in the front door.”

Unbelievable.

“You don’t have to tell me about Viktor Quinn, Governor. I hope the rest of your political career, you take more care in determining who you associate yourself with. Goodbye.”

I end the call before he can protest. His concern is just formality, so he can use my predicament as his political gain.

I return to Samantha’s kitchen, my brain racing like anxious footsteps. Acute pain has settled into a dull throb where most of my lower molar used to be.

“So what happens now?” Samantha asks from her seat at the table. The phone in her hand is lowered, as is mine.

This is how Angie and I spent the last year of our relationship-looking over our phones at each other. The *deja vu* is so strong, I pocket mine.

“Now,” I reply, “we meet Syd.”

“What about Viktor?”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Aren’t you afraid he will come after you?”

I don’t want to say what I haven’t said. I don’t want the insinuation to be planted in her mind, because then she will try to stop me.

“Viktor won’t do anything in broad daylight,” I lie. Viktor doesn’t give a flying fuck, but that would be part of the insinuation I’m avoiding. “Downtown courthouse? It’s full of people, not to mention cops. He wants Rupert, and then Syd. If he survives killing the first two, then I’ll worry.”

The cat, who has eyeballed me suspiciously until now, warms up to me and walks between my legs continuously, rubbing his scent against me.

“Sorry about him,” Samantha says, “He’s an asshole. Should we go, then?”

I nod, and she tells me one second, so she can change and check on her sleeping son. As her muffled footsteps echo on the carpeted stairs behind the kitchen wall, I am alone with my thoughts again, and not one of them are comforting.

I FIND MYSELF THINKING of my father as Samantha’s Jeep weaves

through morning traffic. Most of the downtown area is closed off due to cleanup and investigative presences trying to piece last night together.

I only remember snippets. His favorite drink was Bourbon, and his hands were rough from factory work; he owned more handguns than photos of his four children and he chain-smoked like my mother does.

After that, I remember only a void where he should have been. I wonder what he would think now. If it's the version of him I remember, he would probably beat the shit out of me. My mother told me he died on my fifteenth birthday, six months after she learned of it.

The radio spews out updates between songs, the DJ himself admitting there's so much news coming out of every media orifice, he doesn't have time to tell us all of it.

"However," he says, "we have just pulled audio of *this* clip from CNN. Just now, gubernatorial candidate Rupert Smith has *resigned* from the race, which he *only* entered less than one week ago. Check out the scoop for yourselves."

I recognize Smith's voice as it overtakes the airwaves. Samantha and I share a glance.

"My fellow Americans," he begins, "I have spent my entire career working to strengthen the communication between us. Whether it was bringing big telecom to the farms of our great state, or ensuring technology could facilitate greater conversations between lawmakers and the people who elect them; my company built over half the infrastructure used to bring the Internet to the most remote communities.

"In running to be your Governor, I sought to personally bring that same passion and level of communication to the political realm. To be a buoy between constituents and the representatives who have failed them! But in doing so, I have also failed you."

The morning sun is much higher in the sky now, thickening the humidity that pours in the broken passenger window of Samantha's car. Air conditioning is useless in this instance.

"Unbeknownst to me, certain supporters have come to associate their personal goals and hateful agenda with my own. These people are not sanctioned by either myself or members of my Political Action Committee, and yet my association with such undesirables is inexcusable.

“I take full accountability for this scandal which has enveloped our nation tonight, and respectfully withdraw from the race. I would like to thank my opponent, Harr-Hershel Reyes, pardon me.”

Apart from almost muttering Harry Quinn’s name, I’ll be damned.

I guess Smith does have a soul after all.

…

THE LIE THAT VIKTOR is not stupid enough to attack a courthouse full of authorities and innocent people in broad daylight is extinguished as we pull up to a scene populated with cops, firefighters, hostage negotiators and tens of spectators. Red and white roadblocks prevent the latter from getting too close to any of the fireworks.

Hot, heavy air punches me in every breath as I exit the passenger door. Pushing through a crowd to its front with Samantha in close pursuit, I manage to force myself to the frontline where a lone officer stands with arms crossed. His cap is slightly crooked, and he smells like day-old liquor, but he’s my only hope in getting to Viktor.

I tap him on the shoulder.

“What you want, kid?” he says without turning around. “Can’t you see I’m busy?”

“I know the person responsible for this. I can help you.”

The officer snorts.

“Yeah right, kid,” he replies, “Back the fuck up, ‘don’tcha?”

“He’s telling the truth,” Samantha interjects. “He knows how to put a stop to this.” The cop focuses on the pretty, suburban lady with big brown eyes and a chest to look at. “Officer, look, let him speak with your captain. We can help you make this a lot easier. I’m sure you have a family to get home to, don’t you?”

The cop looks across the scene to where a man in a suede jacket stands, barking out orders. He weighs his option, then beckons us to cross the roadblock and tells us to follow close.

“Captain!” he calls as we approach the jacketed man. His hair is cropped and gray, chin chiseled and lips in a permanent pucker. He turns his attention to us, then whispers to his nearest subordinate, who leaves us.

Our escort explains my claim, that I know the perpetrator they’re trying to reach inside the courthouse but can’t hail on the

telephone.

The captain introduces himself as Briggs. “He’s got at least four hostages in there with him. We’ve been trying to raise him for over an hour. Walked in, fired a gun into the air. Sixteen people got out.” He gulps, the first sign of nervousness I’ve seen. “Got one of my men in there. Eight year veteran. You say you know him?”

“Yes,” I say, “His name is Viktor Quinn. He is single-handedly responsible for the protests last night, here and across the country.”

Briggs takes a moment to process.

“What makes you say that?”

“That’s a long story, Captain. But I see you inspecting my face right now, and yes. It hurts like hell. Viktor did this. I know you believe me.”

On cue, my cell phone rings.

Briggs looks down at my decrepit flip-phone as I produce it from my pocket.

Viktor.

“It’s him,” I tell the Captain.

“Answer. Put it on speaker.”

I oblige him.

“Hello, Peter.”

Viktor’s voice pounces into the atmosphere like disturbed dust creating a cloud. He sounds calm, almost sleepy.

He knows he’s not walking away.

“I should have known you would join the bounty hunters. The fucking cavalry. I can see you. Can you see me?”

“What do you want, Vic?” I ask, looking to the Captain, who listens intently. Several other officers have leaned in to catch what snippets they can amidst the chaos.

“I want to say I’m sorry, Peter. Not that it will make a difference. I know Smith is not coming. Should have killed that piece of shit when I had the chance. But now that we’re all here, and your friends in blue are listening along, I should make it known to you all.

“I have rigged this building with twenty pounds of C4 explosives. It was easy, really. Pay a disgruntled janitor here, throw his body in a Dumpster there. So before, you know, y’all go making any rash decisions about waltzing in here, I would seriously reconsider.”

“You don’t have to do this, Viktor. Let them go, turn yourself in.

It's over."

Viktor laughs. Not a polite laugh, before he condescendingly blows off my two cents with his opinion of gold. It is manic, unhinged.

"Hey, Pete. How's the face?"

More laughing and guffawing in my ear.

Briggs speaks into the phone.

"This is Captain Briggs with the State Police. I'm going to give you one chance to resolve this peacefully, son. Release the hostages and give yourself up to custody."

"You know I can't do that, Captain."

"Then tell us what you want," Briggs demands.

"Tell you what, Captain," Viktor says, "I will trade you a hostage for my friend here. Let him come in here and face me like a fucking man. No protectors. No guns. Hostage for a hostage."

"Hold on," Briggs says, pulling the phone from my open hand and pressing mute. "You know I can't let you do this."

Samantha speaks.

"He's right, Peter. If you go in there, Viktor will kill you."

I look between them.

"I have to do this," I tell both of them.

"I'm sorry," Briggs replies, "This is not a risk I'm comfortable with. He has no reason to kill the hostages he has. If what you've told me is true, he has every reason to start with you."

Briggs unmutes the conversation.

"I'm sorry, Viktor. We cannot fulfill that demand. Based on your emotional state, I'm not comfortable risking...hello?" He pulls the phone closer for inspection, squinting at the display. "He hung up."

Suddenly, a gunshot rings out from within the courthouse. Faint screams accompany it. Samantha ducks, looking around her. Briggs and I are both unfazed by murder at this point.

The phone rings again.

Briggs tells me to put it back on speakerphone.

"That was your guy, Captain," Viktor says, "He looks so proud of what he does, in his pressed and starched uniform. I only shot him in the shoulder, but we both know it doesn't take long to go from bad to worse. You might want to send Pete in so we can work toward getting the poor bastard medical attention."

Briggs hesitates.

"Put me on hold again, and I'll give him a matching scar in his

other shoulder. Right, Wilson?" Viktor says to someone, presumably the officer. "Sorry, I only know him as Wilson. Cunt wouldn't tell me his first name. Anyway, Captain, what's it gonna be?"

Briggs looks to me.

"You sure you can do this?"

I nod, and Briggs tells Viktor I'm on my way, but he expects that hostage. Moments after he hangs up, a woman emerges from the door, her blonde bun frazzled and sobbing into the sleeve of her blouse.

Briggs unholsters his gun and offers it to me.

"Not supposed to do this, but...you know how to use it?"

"I'm not killing anyone, Captain," I reply, but he shoves it into my grip.

"Just in case," he says, "Good luck, kid."

I look back at Samantha, whose mouth contorts beneath the hand she holds over it. Yet, she nods her reluctant support for my decision, before staring at the ground.

Approaching the heavy wooden doors of a building that has been falling apart for the better part of three decades, I admire the stonework of something built far more durable than me. I reach for the handle and pull. The door creaks, all the failures of our justice system thrust upon their hinges and closes behind me as I step into darkness.

Hopefully, for the final time.

Peter

I WONDER IF, TO VIKTOR, this has all been worth it.

Looking up at the columns over a rotunda of black and white circles, where hundreds of people cross on a daily basis, this must be purgatory.

In one fell swoop, he neutralized the heart of law and order in our little town. He could have blown up the police station and not gotten half the response. Instead, he went after judges and cops and their clerks in kind, even bringing the sleepy city council next door to a standstill.

Again, Smith has been caught in scandal by a member of the Quinn family. Once again, he will narrowly escape major scrutiny because all the blame will fall on Viktor and his crew.

I'm not sure what has become of Sydney and the girl she took, but they are not included in the tunnel vision my existence has become. Samantha and the police can sort them out.

A gun back in the rear of my jeans, I move carefully, not feeling any safer for being armed. Under my shirt, it feels cold, like a weight I never wanted to carry.

Looking around and behind me as I force myself to press forward, there is no sign of Viktor. There is no sign of Sydney. As I step in the dead center of the rotunda, Viktor appears from behind one of the columns.

He yells, lunging at me like a wild dog. The force as he connects is powerful enough to knock me off both feet, landing hard on my back.

Pain sears through my entire spine, but I roll as he comes for me again, and misses. The second time, though, he does not miss, grabbing hold of my sweat-soaked shirt.

Viktor forces me to my feet then pushes me back into one of the columns. My feet don't work, and I collapse into it, smacking my head and rolling back to the rotunda's center.

I come to rest on my stomach, wincing. Every breath is a struggle. My whole head swims with the fish that are discombobulated thoughts.

"I trusted you, Peter," Viktor pants, pacing back and forth over

my static body before reaching down and pulling Briggs' gun from the back of my pants. "I trusted you and you fucked me."

"You fucked yourself!" I scream through the pain that radiates everywhere.

Viktor aims the gun and fires it. At first, I think he's shot me in the back, before what I perceive as sweat down my leg becomes knowledge it's blood.

There are no words for the pain. It is death while living, the raw mass of my upper thigh a clusterfuck of mutilated muscle and fat, spewing out. I push my teeth together, wishing I had a belt. The broken tooth aches and the muscles in my back spasm, and I am resigned.

"Any other smart-ass remarks, Peter? Or do you want one in the other leg?"

"No!" I cry, too broken for actual tears. "No! Just fucking kill me, already!"

Viktor chuckles. "Well, at least you have no illusions left. I told you, there are worse things than death, Pete." He walks a circle around me, over and over, gun at his side.

Now I know he's willing to use it.

"Here's the thing, Peter. I don't have any illusions about my chances, either. I fucked up. So where can I find peace in going down, apart from taking you with me?"

My leg is where the Devil lives.

I am in Hell.

"Well, there are three scenarios here. One, I can kill every person in that other room, you and myself while your friends count the bullets fired before rushing in here to find a massacre. That option seems a little trailer park for me. I'd rather make a statement.

"So, I can blow this place sky-fucking-high. Leave a crater in the ground where Rupert's fucking corpse should be. Where I told him to announce it. The pinnacle of principles all society is built on.

"Trade your absolute freedom for security and order. That's what this place represents. And it's a fucking sham, Peter. It really is. It's left to bias and interpretation, so judgement really rests with human error and not the supreme law of the land.

"Anyway," Viktor says, despite my weak attempts at sobbing into the ground. "That's option two. I like option two, but it's missing something."

He lights a cigarette from his pack, then exchanges the container for a thin grey fob with a button at its end. Viktor stops directly in front of me, leans down and forces it into my palm.

"I think," he says, "it would be more fun if you did the honors, Pete. Option three."

I focus on the trigger in my hand, armed with the power to level half a city block and a local landmark, kill anyone in the building and take a mixed bag legend of anti-villain.

I let it drop to the ground, choosing to return to my agony instead.

He forces me to hold it again, telling me if I drop it again, he'll kill me.

I disobey. The detonator clatters on the ground beside me.

"*Fuck you*," I spit.

Viktor grimaces, says it's fine.

Raises his gun and fires again.

The pain is greater this time, aimed lower down my other leg. I scream, and pound my forehead into the floor, praying for quick end.

"Do as I say!" Viktor demands.

"Oh, stop it, Viktor!"

I manage to turn my head to see the other end of the room. Between the columns, from my skewed perspective, Sydney is instantly recognizable. The bandage is gone, and despite the dark, I can see her mangled flesh, the half-eaten eyelid, the sandpaper on her lips. Most of the hair on the affected side is either missing or withered.

I feel cold, starting from my feet.

"Sydney," Viktor says.

I don't have the energy to turn my head again so soon. My eyes flutter and I try to stay conscious. Whatever comes, I may need my strength.

"Don't point that fucking gun at me, you psychopath!"

"Fine," he says, out of my view, "I'm putting it down. Let's talk."

Sydney scoffs. "Didn't your mother ever tell you not to play with your food, Vic?" She walks closer to me, and I don't have the capacity to keep her face in my peripheral vision.

So cold.

"He's not food. He's prey. Same as you."

"And what good is this going to do?" she says, "Can't push the

big, bad button yourself? You have to make *this* piece of shit-" She kicks me in the ribcage, and the world is a cloud of suffocation. "-blow up a fucking building? It's like trying to get a cat to herd sheep. Are you that dense? He doesn't have the balls!"

"So, *you're* going to push it, I assume?" Viktor asks.

I hang onto their every word, for I have already spoken my final, defiant ones.

"This is your master plan, Viktor. Every *fucking man I've ever met* had to have some master fucking plan, and I *always* fucking paid for it. So no, I'm not pushing the motherfucking button. I'm okay watching cops mow you down all the same."

"You ruined the master plan, baby," he says, "It was flawless."

"You say it's flawless," Syd replies, "You're a man, and men never see the flaws. They don't see it when they rape you. They don't see it when they kill somebody, and they don't see it in throwing people away."

"How the fuck was I supposed to know that would happen, Sydney? Huh? **Tell me what more I could have done**!"

She walks closer to him, completely out of my line of sight. I hear breathing, like two mouths before a kiss. It's heavy like the air in here.

Pain is fading to numbness.

Awareness is a foreign concept now.

"You should have kept me at your side. Like I would have done for you."

I have rarely been in love, but a lot of people around me suck at it.

"I'm sorry, Sydney."

My parents sucked at it. My sister is bad at it.

My brother's love life is nonexistent.

"I'm sorry, too."

"Should I?" Viktor asks.

People talk about love like it's make-or-break. Like it's material success. Like, you want a fairy tale romance, but in reality you have a person within arm's reach you can beat down until they are a shell of themselves, trying to fit them into your perfect fucking box.

"Let me."

The only people I know who don't suck at love are Vic and Syd, mostly because they don't give a shit about-

It only takes one moment to change the world, you know.

And what moment is that?

What's your name, kid?

Peter.

I'm Viktor.

Quinn.

This is Syd.

A very special girl.

Don't fucking speak for me, Viktor.

You still haven't answered my question, I say.

He speaks.

What question is that?

What moment changes the world?

He laughs, drawing on the filter of his cigarette, which seems short in his long, elegant fingers.

The one we are foolish enough to believe has passed. Think of it this way, Peter. If someone told you the fucking Holocaust was something that never had the potential to happen again. Would you believe them?

I like to believe people learn from their mistakes.

The people that lived those mistakes, sure. Ones who saw in their newspaper the ghastly illustrations of Auschwitz, or the soldier on his knees for all the innocents lost, their murders hidden from the real world. Those people, who lived through the ordeal, and the world that witnessed it. Only those ones remember.

And we don't?

Human beings are arrogant creatures, Peter. We say 'never again' once, twice, three times. We preach, then forget. We kill, express sorrow, and kill again.

Bit of a nihilist, aren't you?

You have no fucking idea, my friend.

Samantha

The moments leading up to the explosion are quiet, save for whispers among police officers and Captain Briggs taking the odd phone call or barking an order at one of his underlings. All eyes are on the building, waiting for a sign from the dead. Cameras roll, and people film from the sidelines, but a healthy dose of anticipation and fear is injected into the July morning air, thick as ever.

My cell phone rings.

I pull it out, mouthing an apology to Briggs, who glares at me for having the audacity to answer it in such a tense situation.

Nathan.

I tell Briggs it's my son and I will return. He looks annoyed but nods and turns back to his colleague. I walk toward the crowd, establishing a safe distance from Briggs' earshot. I'm assuming it's quite large.

"Nathan?"

"Mom! Nadia is okay."

I exhale, the most relief I have felt since...well, the hospital. Then, another thought creeps up on me.

Her entire family is dead.

"Mom?"

"Yeah honey, I'm here."

"That's good news, right?"

My eyes close.

"Yes, Nathan. That's amazing news. I am so glad she's safe. Where is she now?"

"Next door with the police."

"Nathan."

"Yeah, Mom?"

"Nadia is going to be dealing with some stuff for the next bit. Let's wait for her to reach out to us, okay?"

"What do you mean?"

"All, I'm saying is, let-"

I am cut short by a deafening sound behind me. Screams and shouting are indistinct, and immediately drowned out by the sounds

of glass shattered, metal twisting and cars thrown.

The sky is red for a second, then black seeps upwards into yellow glare. Everything is hotter when it couldn't have been any more unbearable just seconds earlier.

I move for the ground, crawling to get away from the dark filth that rushes out of the sagging building. I can't breathe because the air is hot and tastes like ash.

Pieces of the courthouse's roof collapse into the upper level as the rest of the building groans at its new geometry. I don't see it as this happens, but hear it, pieces of metal snapping and bending in ways its architects never envisioned for it.

I crawl for safety, fresh air, life.

My elbows dig at the ground. The phone is back there, my son likely screaming into the fucking receiver on his, but there can be no conversation if I'm dead.

I don't even know if Briggs survived.

Peter definitely didn't.

I reach oxygen, in the middle of a street over a manhole cover. I can smell the shit from here. I'm not sure if it's the sewer itself or the corpses not far from here. Sirens wail like a bad song on repeat.

Failing to wipe dust from my eyes with an equally coated wrist, I try to blink it out instead. Coughing and gagging and gasping for air, I roll over, focused on the sky above me. My vision is a cloud in the sky, duplicating the others, far above.

The air is still thick, but I can see the blue now.

Epilogue

Samantha

Funerals are a bleak affair.

Catherine's seems like a lifetime ago. Unlike hers, I am not associated with anyone here. Under the poplar tree of the local cemetery, where a priest with a crumpled frock performs last rites over a wooden casket, I am no one of particular interest to any of the people in attendance.

I can look at the mother, old and decrepit, and see my own in her stone-faced expression, sun-damaged skin and dry lips, but she does not owe it to return my stare.

Observe the old brother, who is almost Derek in his pressed suit and stupid haircut. He's trying to grow a beard. Cute. When he speaks of his deceased brother, he speaks like Peter was a hero but drips of big brother skepticism. The mother scowls and looks at the ground, shaking her head.

The sister does not speak. She dresses severely, pantsuit and a bun wound tighter than most people tie their shoelaces. Like the mother, she does not notice me standing away from the crowd, holding my sunglasses at thigh level where my black skirt begins.

I still have the body for it, why not?

I spent so long burrowing deeper into a hole Derek dug for me, I forgot all the light in the opposite direction. For as much wine I drank and tears I shed in Peter York's honour, he showed me there was still a reason to push forward.

I came here today, resolved to tell his family that.

I'm not ever sure how much of Peter York is actually left. To my knowledge, they retrieved his body. Obviously, an open casket was not possible. As they lower him into the ground, none of his family members show much emotion.

My son is safe. Nadia is safe. The people in my life who matter are unharmed, and that's more than I can ask for.

"The woman let me go," Nadia told me, on the front step of my house, because hers is a foyer of trauma.

She lives with us for now.

I gave her the master, although the ghosts now are fewer. I'm

sure she has enough of her own to compete with any remaining.

"Why do you think that is?" I asked her.

Nadia shrugged. "Peace. It is a providence."

I struggled to place the quote. "Miller?"

"That's right."

"I'm so sorry, Nadia," I told her, "I know that's probably not worth much after all you've seen-"

"I'm okay," she interrupted. "Omar was responsible for a lot of terrible things. His fate is deserved. Iza, less so. But Farhad's has left a huge hole in me.

"War desensitizes you to many things. Coming here, I saw things no child should see. I have seen enough terrible things to be at peace with this. Maybe later, I will mourn. But today, I am happy to be free of my chains."

I smiled, looking into the street where Chester and his crew have been noticeably absent from the last few weeks.

"That makes two of us. Not," I said, foot already in mouth, "that it ever compared, really. Sorry."

She placed a hand on my arm. "Never be sorry, Samantha. You had everything taken from you as well. It may not have been physically dangerous, but it was a dark place to live."

I think of her words now, staring at Peter's mother. The problem with mourning strangers, usually, is a lack of context to base your condolences on.

Moving toward the procession after watching from afar like a crazy person, I don't need to rehearse my words or worry how they will be received. The frills of my dress are ruffled with the wind as I near the immobilized woman.

I stop, standing beside her, keeping hands clasped and my voice low.

"Your son *was* a hero, Mrs. York," I say after a moment of listening to the priest with no acknowledgement from her. "Just in case you had any doubt."

"And who are you?" she mutters. The sister shoots a glare at me, as if to ask the same question with her eyes.

"Someone who had a mother like you," I whisper, "No offense. Never proud of her children, no matter how hard they tried to appease her. Always saw the worst in us, my mother. But he loved you, like all boys love their mommy. He grew up in spite of you, but he died a fucking hero, ma'am. Pardon my language. Bad taste

at a funeral."

The old woman with her shriveled lips and toothless bottom row thinks a moment.

"You his whore?" she grumbles.

"Nope," I say somewhat louder, trying to swallow the insult. "I met Peter barely an hour before he died. And excuse me, but I'm not a whore, you miserable bat."

More eyes focus on me.

"So, I'm going to leave now," I tell her, "May so many people show up to yours, Mrs. York." I nod at the sister, who seems caught between outrage and wanting to applaud me.

I ignore the stares on my back, crossing the graveyard, legs crossing over each other trying not to trip in my new heels. I'm out of practice.

Freddie greets me by the entrance. His son is buried here, now. After learning the chip wagon was a casualty of raiders, insurance paid him out and Esmeralda, smelling money, let him back in the house. In return, that money paid to have Jason laid to rest.

His bruises are fading, but he's half blind in one eye. It's an all-around mixed bag.

"How did it go?" he asks as I approach him.

I shrug.

"Like most funerals, I kind of crashed it." I gesture to the cemetery behind me. "Want to visit Jason?"

He thinks for a moment. "I'm not ready."

"Okay."

"So," Freddie says, "kid get a state funeral?"

"Hardly. Family doesn't really seem to believe what he did. There are some cops, but short of a fucking parade, I don't think they're gonna buy it."

He pulls a smoke from his pocket.

"Got a light for an old man, dear?"

I dig into my handbag and pass it to him. "Guess I can't compliment you on your youthful appearance anymore, can I?"

He lights the cigarette, passing it back to me.

"I still accept flattery from time to time."

"You're absolutely glowing, Freddie."

He scoffs, exhaling smoke at the same time.

"Now you're just sellin' me bullshit. Like that fryer salesman."

"You gonna buy another chip wagon?"

He shakes his head. “Wanna do something new.” Pause. “I don’t know where it all got fucked up, Sam. I mean, there’s always been trouble for us coloured folks. Right from the founding of this country, we were such a fuckin’ issue.”

“What happened two weeks ago had nothing to do with racism, Freddie,” I say.

“Don’t matter. We got populist politicians pouring salt in closed wounds. You got the activists out there, stirring up shit at our behest. This ain’t started with Viktor Quinn, and it ain’t gonna be finished with him.”

I don’t know how to console him.

“I think,” I say, foot in mouth again, “for every Viktor Quinn, there will be someone to stop them.”

“A Peter York,” Freddie says.

I repeat his name, lest I ever forget the man who restored my faith in humanity. He saved my child and the world with no regard for himself.

“Well,” he replies, “let’s hope reincarnation is a thing. Because we need more of him.”

“I don’t know if I’m the right person to be talking to about these things,” I chuckle. “However, I do know a church some crazy lady visits. She might know something about it.”

“Is she hiring?” Freddie jokes, and I laugh, because he always brings that side out in me. It’s a little easier to reach.

We walk away from the cemetery entrance, side by side, as we’ve always been since high school. Two unfortunate souls looking for their fortune.

Life is a beautiful affair in the strangest ways.

Olivia

Time is a cruel trick.

People let it tick away like it has some measure of greater importance. It's just the moments on their existence running out.

I was once so oblivious.

I know the Wallace woman and her friend can't see me, even as I watch them converse outside the cemetery. Her perception of me is flattering, yet unimportant.

For what it's worth, I'd give anything to be some crazy woman.

They walk away together, but I remain by the gates. There is no further need to intervene, nothing more I could do for her.

I stand there a while, trying to remember what the air in my lungs would feel like on such a beautiful day. What the sun would feel like beating down on me, if my flesh was warm and my heart still beat.

I am not sure how long I stand there, because time is meaningless. At some point I am joined by a man I know better than I want to, long thinning hair that dances on the back of his neck and rose-colored glasses. He wears a suit now- a nice change from his usual attire these days.

"Thank God you didn't wear that horrendous shirt," I tell him as he idles beside me.

"What?" he says, lighting a cigarette. "It's my favorite shirt. But we are at a funeral, so it's inappropriate to appear so cheerful."

I roll my eyes. I can't smell the smoke, but I imagine it's pungent. My stare remains fixated on the graveyard. The procession has long ended, but I have nowhere better to wait out existence.

"How long you going to be mad at me this time?" he asks, drawing on the filter. He does it for the social aspect, he says. Man doesn't have lungs himself. "Last time was a decade."

"I have the time, thanks to you," I snipe. His expression under the glasses does not change. "You know better, Hale."

"Okay," he says. "I shared a cell with Quinn. Wasn't hard to pull off. Even easier to get out. Besides, the boy was a lost cause. All I did was give a good shove in the opposite direction. Gave him

purpose."

"You know that's not what I'm talking about."

"The York kid? Really? I knew you would be pissed at me because...I know. I know. 'Don't toy with human nature, Hale'. Can you blame me for having some fun with it?"

"Not what I was talking about, either," I say. "But while we're at it, yes, we've had this conversation endlessly."

"Then I don't understand where you're going with this, Olivia."

I cast him a look of death, but he stares right back at me, everywhere I look.

"I'm talking about the Shroud."

"Oh, *that,*" Hale says. "Look, I didn't think Conway would survive. I didn't anticipate the Wallace woman taking them down. Aren't I allowed the odd mistake?"

"You can lie to yourself all you want," I reply, looking back at the graveyard, "but I know you too well. The rules of the game are clear, Hale. And you know exactly how to get what you want, don't you?

"I think you knew exactly what would happen. And you would get one more contestant for this sick, twisted addiction of yours. But someone will break that wheel of yours someday. The more you toy with human nature, the worse your downfall will be."

"Said like you care."

"I care about this world," I say, "but any hope I had of caring for you died with me."

"And now, you are the nuisance I have to live with in my head," Hale says. "Worse, you're autonomous."

"I am well aware of how much destruction you cause with only a few, well-placed words. I only intervene when I need to."

He thinks for a moment. "Why the woman, though? York could have used you more, couldn't he?"

"I guess this is one of those times my empathy got the better of me. After all, I'm a crazy woman from church."

Hale finishes his cigarette and flicks it in the street. It does not land and scatter away, because it is not matter, bound to the earth, but a prop of his making.

"Remember Olivia, we did not choose this. It was chosen for us. And whether you like it or not, I have a role in shaping the world now."

"You take it too far, Hale."

I finally step from where I've stood a small eternity, knowing wherever I stop, nothing changes. I just have to keep moving.

"I liked the way you looked before," Hale remarks.

"The feeling is mutual," I tell him before he bids me farewell, shuffling down the sidewalk, in search of his next cosmic manipulation.

We will cross again, no doubt. It may take a week or a century, but he always comes back to me, or I to him.

We are bound, impervious to the waves of time threatening our separation.

One could only wish.

I understand why Hale tempts people. Why he manipulates them and hastens their exits from this world. Boredom is a powerful motivator, and time is saturated with it. Few people would wield his power responsibly.

I don't agree with it any more for that concession, either.

Hale is right.

We did not choose this.

It was chosen for us.

Time is a cruel trick.

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The story continues in Book 3 of the Olivia & Hale series

If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving a review on Goodreads or with your preferred retailer.

About the Author

NICHOLAS GAGNIER IS the author of ten books, including the eight book Shroud Saga, composed of the Olivia & Hale series and its spinoff The Book of Death. He lives in Ottawa with his wife and two children.

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